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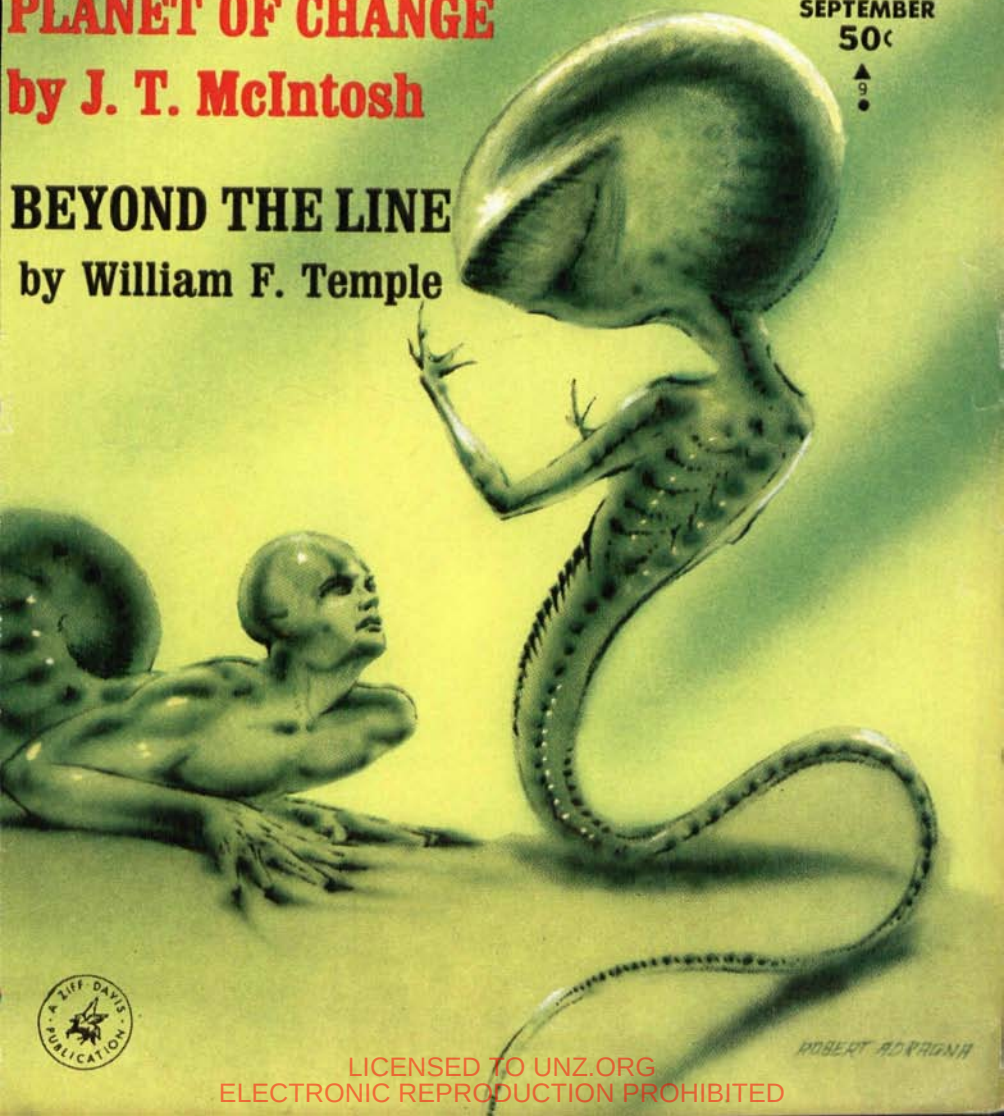

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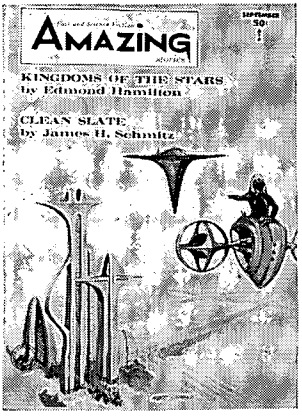

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FANTASTIC

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Illustrating *Planet of Change*

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EDITORIAL

SOMETIME ago, in this space, deponent gave vent to refined wrath at the kind of fantasy one got on television and in the movies (e.g., *Twilight Zone's* fanciful coynesses, the frantic comic-book antics of the Jetsons, and the dull single-mindedness of monsters from the airy or briny deeps bent on drawing and quartering the heroine).

Evidently deponent's wrath availed naught (as was anticipated), and evidently more wrath will avail naught neither (or is it "either"?). But we will have a go at it, anyway, stimulated mostly by a horrifying little item gleaned from the daily press. Guess what is in store for you on the CBS-TV network next season? We are going to have a series about robots.

Now, this is not going to be a documentary about progress in robotics. It is not going to be a literate approach to the subject, such as could have been based on any of a dozen Isaac Asimov robot stories. Nope, it's going to be a situation comedy about a handsome young bachelor who gets the custody of a scientifically-created beautiful girl robot. Bob Cummings will be the bachelor, and Julie Newmar the b.g.r. And the title of this caper? Ready?—*Living Doll.*

If there are any among you who cannot already see, in letters of fire, the twists and turns of this script every week, then we don't want you reading *us.* You *belong* in front of a television set.

Why, with all the tragic, ironic, important, lovely stories that have been written on the subject of robotics, and which would lend themselves to dramatization, does a network come up with a travesty of an idea like this? Well, for the same reason, we suppose, that Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* go un-televised while a ridiculous thing like *My Favorite Martian* cavorts across the idiot box. One assumes that if a programming executive ever even heard of Zenna Henderson's *The People* series, it would come out something like The Andromeda Hillbillies. Can't all of the people who do things like this be put on the first slower-than-light ship to the Magellanic Clouds? —NL.

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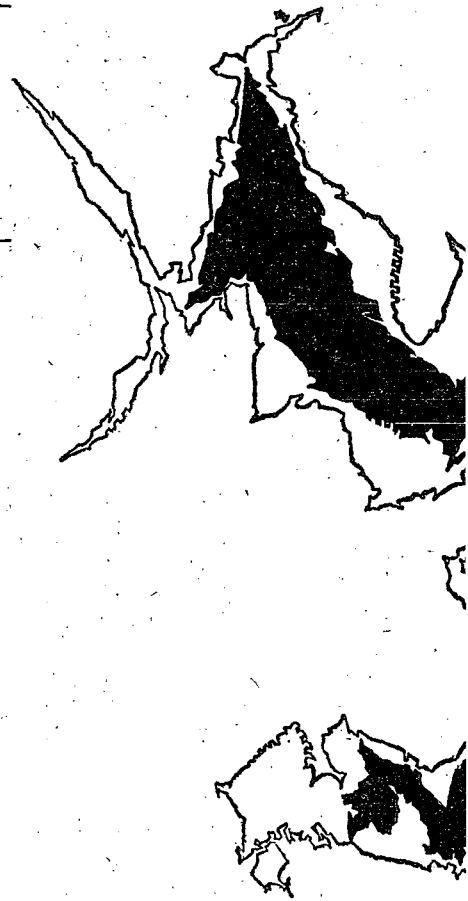
Frobisher had a reputation as a suicide planet. But the mutineers never really knew what metamorphoses took place beneath the barrier layers.



I WANT you to handle it yourself,' Captain Vindall said firmly.

Paton stirred uneasily in his chair. But he said: "If that's what you want, sir—"

"It *is* what I want. These men have to get hung, Frank. If by some chance they got off, the Space Navy's scouting program would be finished. For that matter the Space Navy would be just about finished. No Navy can ever afford to have any sympathy with mutineers. How can you run a Navy when nobody has to obey any orders he doesn't feel like obeying?"

"Still, there are certain features about this case, sir—"

PLANET OF CHANGE

By J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrator ADRAGNA

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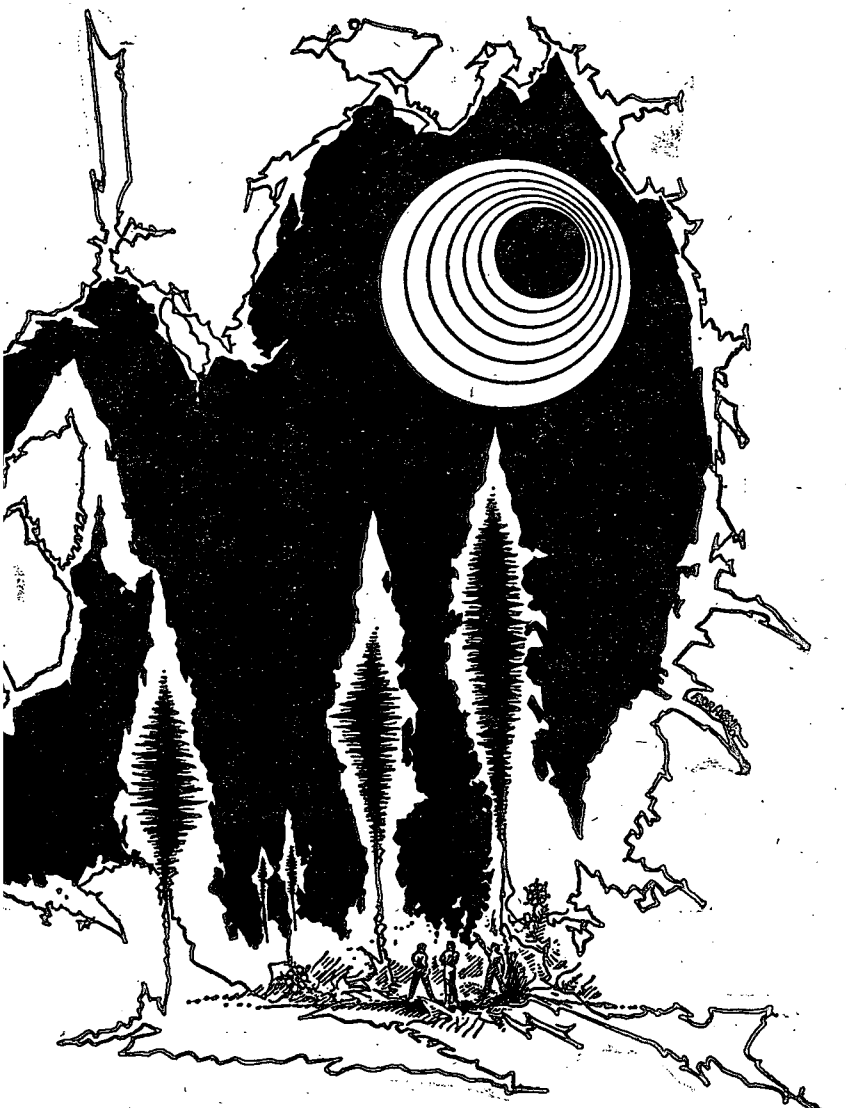

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"Hell, Frank, I'm the legal officer and I've got the inquiry findings right here." Vindall picked up a buff-colored folder, lifted it nine inches off his leather-topped desk, and let it drop with a bang. Half a dozen loose papers sideslipped to the floor. "I know all the features about this case. None of them can alter the fact that the capatin of the *Mirror* took his ship to Frobisher and when he gave the order to land, his officers and the crew mutinied."

"That's true," Paton admitted, "as far as it goes. But it wasn't a mutiny in the ordinary sense. The captain wasn't relieved or restrained. . . . He brought his ship back and the return trip was like any other trip. The only order of his that was not obeyed was the order to land on Frobisher."

"Does that make it any better, for God's sake? A perfectly normal, efficient captain with no blot on his record takes the *Mirror* half across the galaxy. When he reaches his destination, the officers decide they're not going to land. The crew backs them and there's nothing the captain can do but come home again. Do you know how many million dollars it cost to send the *Mirror* to Frobisher?"

"I know, sir. But frankly, I'd rather defend Simpson and the others than prosecute."

"Too bad," said Vindall. "I've got Winterset for the defense."

Paton blinked. "Winterset? Sir, may I say something?"

"Of course."

"If I'm judge advocate and Winterset is defense counsel, there are going to be a lot of people saying that this court martial is rigged."

From the calm way in which he took this, the suggestion was no surprise to the legal officer. "Why, Frank?" he said mildly. "What's wrong with Winterset?"

"He's such a hot shot on naval tradition that he won't put up more than a token defense. I'm only guessing, but if you got him to agree to defend those men you must have told him it was his duty, practically ordered him to do it. . . . He must be as eager to speak for them as they were to land on Frobisher."

"Except that Winterset is going to do his duty and those men didn't."

"Is he going to do his duty, sir? There are half a dozen points he can make that I'd have a heck of a job to nullify. But will he make them? Winterset, who was entered for the Naval Academy the moment his proud parents learned he wasn't a girl?"

"Yet he studied law," Vindall observed pensively.

"Only when he knew his health was going to keep him out of space-going ships, sir."

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Vindall leaned forward across his desk. "Listen, Frank, as society in general gets softer and softer and things that were luxuries twenty years ago become accepted as necessities, civilians think they have a right to squeal at the smallest, slightest restrictions—but the Navy still has to have discipline, and discipline means blind, unquestioning obedience even of muddle-headed or sadistic orders. Now, Captan Brown never gave orders like that. He's not only one of the most efficient lieutenant commanders in the Navy, he's also one of the most popular."

"Still, sir, we're not at war. That's fundamental in this case. In war, the officers of the *Mirror* or any other ship would have had to obey an order they knew meant certain death for all of them. Everybody accepts that. But in peacetime—"

"Frank, out in deep space the Navy is *always* at war. Umpteen light-years from base, the captain of any ship has to have all the authority any captain ever had in any war in history—more, because he can't hope for orders or advice. He's *got* to complete his mission somehow, he's got to do something, right or wrong. When he comes back and reports what he's done, the Navy leans over backwards to support his actions—because out there he's not just a lieutenant commander or even an admiral, he's the Navy itself."

Paton hesitated, and then nodded. It was no use arguing any more. For that matter, it had never been any use arguing. The Navy had no choice but to back Captain Brown to the hilt and clamp down hard on Lieutenant David Simpson and the rest. Simpson himself, being an officer with twenty years' experience, must have been fully aware of this all along.

The Navy didn't hand out medals to execs who acted as Simpson had done. Even if Simpson got off, he didn't really get off. Would the Navy ever give a command to a man who had rejected the Navy's right to command?

DAVID SIMPSON was the coolest man present as the members of the court were sworn in. He was a huge man, burly yet surprisingly light on his feet. But for his eyes he looked stupid, an unthinking, impulsive man of action. His eyes, however, were deep as wells, eternally watching, assessing.

The other thing about him which was surprising was his age. Even the most senior space-going naval officers had to be young—the physical stresses of space demanded youth. At Simpson's age, forty-two, he might well have been a captain or an ordinary sailor. Finding him

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an exec raised two automatic questions in naval minds. *What kept him out of command? How did he climb to be executive officer?*

Frank Paton took a good look at David Simpson, tried to assess him and failed. It didn't seem to worry Simpson the least little bit that he was on trial alone.

At the time, of course, the officers and crew of the naval exploration ship *Mirror* had taken considerable trouble to present a united front. The refusal to land on Frobisher had not been delivered to Captain Brown as an act of insubordination of one man or even of several men: officers and crew had stood together and said *We will not.*

The Navy, however, naturally enough brought the exec to trial first. On what happened in Simpson's court martial would depend what action was taken against the other officers and the crew.

One reason why Simpson was not unduly worried, Paton thought shrewdly, might be that every witness from the *Mirror,* with the exception of Lieutenant Commander Peter Brown, could be assumed to be solidly on Simpson's side. If he got off, they got off. If he was guilty, they were guilty.

Beside Simpson, Stephen Winterset looked as if he would rather be anywhere else. He was a tall, stooping lieutenant commander whose family tradition might well have forced him to become a great naval hero—but for the unfortunate fact that a weak chest prevented him from being anything more than an office admiral, if that.

When the legal formalities were concluded and the president of the court, a white-haired captain who was old enough to have served in rocket ships, had signified that the judge advocate could start to present his case, Frank Paton called Lieutenant Commander Peter Silverman Brown.

Paton watched Simpson as Brown entered. The exec betrayed nothing but polite interest as Brown entered and took his seat on the dais in the center of the room.

Brown was forty, rather small, with a quiet but firm manner. He looked as if he was used to being in full command of any situation. He did not look like the kind of captain whose crew would flatly refuse to obey him. But he did look like the kind of captain who, even after such a crisis, would be able to reassert his authority and bring his ship home in good order: the kind of man who would never allow a retreat to become a rout.

"Commander," said Paton, "what were your orders when the *Mirror* blasted off on April 23, 2153?"

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"I was to proceed to Frobisher, in the Seefarne system, and land an exploration party there."..

The captain's voice was resonant and firm. When he looked at Simpson there was faint surprise in his expression, as through he could still scarcely believe that he and Simpson could be facing each other in such circumstances.

"Were you to lead the exploration party personally, sir?" Paton asked.

"No. I was to remain on board my ship."

"Were you, in fact, expressly forbidden to land?"

"I was."

THERE was a slight stir in court. The judge advocate was opening his case as if he was defending Simpson, not prosecuting him.

"You were not to land personally in any circumstances?"

"I was not."

"Who then was to lead the landing party?"

"It was left to my discretion."

"Whom did you eventually appoint to lead the landing party?"

"My executive officer, Lieutenant Simpson."

Paton paused for a moment. The natural thing to do now would be to ask why Brown had chosen his exec and bring out evidence that made the mutiny as heinous as possible.

Instead Paton went back to Brown's orders. "Were your orders secret, commander?"

The captain hesitated slightly and looked at Captain Merchant, the president. Merchant said nothing.

"I'll rephrase the question," Paton said. "Were you to inform your officers of your destination?"

"They knew we were bound for the Seefarne system. Naturally."

"Did they know the ship was bound for Frobisher?"

Brown looked at the president again. The president looked at the defense counsel, who was looking at his boots.

"No," said Brown.

"What did they know, then, or have reason to believe?"

"My orders," said Brown, realizing there was no help for it, "were to inform the ship's company that we were to explore the southern hemisphere of the planet Magellan."

"The fourth planet of the Seefarne system, Frobisher being the third?"

"That is correct."

"Why were you to do this, commander?"

Merchant leaned forward. "The court," he said, "would like the judge advocate to explain this line of questioning."

"Sir," said Paton, "although it is no part of my tactics to antici-

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pate the defense, I would like the somewhat peculiar nature of the *Mirror's* mission to go on record at the outset. Commander Brown has already testified that his orders were to mislead the entire ship's company about the nature of his mission. These being his *orders*, I think it is only fair to Commander Brown, as well as to the accused, to clarify the position before proceeding."

"You may proceed," said Merchant, leaning back.

Paton turned back to Brown. "Why, commander, were you to mislead the ship's company?"

"Because," said Brown, "there would be no trouble about exploring Magellan. But there might be trouble about exploring Frobisher."

"This, then, was known before you started?"

"Yes."

"What was the point of deception, when eventually you had to tell your men that Frobisher was the real destination?"

"It's a long trip. At least there would be no trouble on the way out."

"I want to turn now to the history of Frobisher. Captain—"

Merchant said: "If the judge advocate wants to introduce evidence about previous expeditions to Frobisher, the court presumes he will call independent witnesses?"

"To save time," Paton said, "I'd like to question the present witness, if the defense has no objection. I only want to establish the general picture."

WINTERSET rose, unfolding himself slowly and painfully. "Defense has no objection," he said. Then he folded himself up again.

"Briefly, commander," Paton said, "what is the history of exploration of Frobisher?"

"Magellan, a Terran-type world, was colonized fifty years ago," Brown said. At first reluctant to cooperate in this line of questioning, he had apparently decided that it all had to come out. "A brief visit to Frobisher at that time showed it to be an inhospitable jungle world, too hot to be suitable for human habitation except at the poles. Large and savage animals abounded and the bacteriological life was dense and dangerous. Since Magellan offered no such problems, colonization of the system was at first confined to one world."

"At first, commander?"

"Correction,' said Brown. "Colonization has remained confined to Magellan. No subsequent landing party has ever left Frobisher."

"You mean parties have landed but have not been able to take off again?"

"Exactly. Two civilian and two naval exploration teams have

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since gone down in small ships, leaving a parent ship in orbit. Nobody returned."

"But the landing parties must have had radio contact with the parent ship?"

"No. Frobisher's layers stop all incoming and outgoing radio waves. They also to a large extent block radar. So there has been no contact whatever with any member of the last four landing parties from the moment the ships disappeared from sight."

"Thank you, commander. These facts are well known throughout the Space Navy?"

"I wouldn't say well known. The galaxy is vast, and landings have been made on hundreds of worlds. But anyone going to that area would be able to find out what I've told you, and more."

"So the Navy expected trouble, is that so?"

"Yes."

"And you, commander? Did you expect trouble?"

"No," said Brown firmly. "I was in command of a naval exploration ship. If I'd been told to land on Jupiter I would have done so . . ."

"But in this case you were not allowed to land, you were to appoint someone else. What was your reaction when your men refused to land, commander?"

Winterset unfolded himself again, more quickly this time. "Objection," he said. "The judge advocate seems to be avoiding the incident which led to this trial. He's going all round it."

"If I may be allowed to conclude this line of questioning,"

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Paton said, "I'll go at once to the main event."

"Proceed," Merchant said.

Paton repeated his question.

"I wanted to land myself," Brown said.

"Despite your express orders to the contrary?"

"First things first. My mission was to explore Frobisher. If my men refused to land, it was my duty to do myself what they refused to do."

"And what happened when you tried to land?"

"No one would accompany me. And it is impossible to land a space launch alone."

"So you were forced to abandon your plan to land yourself?"

"Yes."

PATON then turned to the actual mutiny. The facts were simple: when Brown put his ship into orbit around Frobisher and briefed his officers, they refused in a body to obey any order relating to landing, though obeying all others.

"What was their manner, commander?"

"Respectful and regretful. They said that landing meant certain death. They asked me to withdraw my order."

"And what did you do?"

"Insisted that we land."

"Thank you, commander. No more questions."

Again the court was taken by surprise. The judge advocate had given the appearance of being engaged in a lengthy examination of the witness. His abrupt closure brought a frown to Merchant's face.

"The court will be cleared," the president said.

When Brown, Simpson and Winterset had been led out by an orderly, Merchant looked hard at Paton and said: "The court does not wish you to present your closing statement now, but some explanation seems called for. Are you pressing for a conviction on a lesser charge?"

"No, sir," said Paton. "But I want it to be clear from the beginning that Captain Brown was placed in an awkward position by his orders. The fact that he was to pretend his destination was *not* Frobisher until the last moment could be construed by the ship's company as an invitation to mutiny. They must have felt the Navy had tricked them . . ."

"Neither the Navy nor Captain Brown is on trial. Surely it is up to defense counsel to present these circumstances in mitigation?"

"Sir," said Paton, "there is something peculiar about this case which the inquiry has completely failed to clarify. What happened was not so much a mutiny as a well-organized sit-down strike. The complement of the *Mirror* was twenty-seven. When

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twenty-six officers and men are suddenly and unexpectedly ordered to commit suicide, in their estimation, they don't calmly and respectfully refuse, in a body. Some say meekly 'Yes, sir,' some object, looking round for support, some try to sit on the fence. What I want to find out is how this sitdown strike was organized, when nobody had the slightest idea that there was anything to strike against."

"I see," said Merchant thoughtfuly, looking at Paton with more respect.

The members of the court conferred. And the orderly was sent for the accused and his counsel. Brown took the stand again to answer defense counsel's questions.

Winterset made little of the material presented to him by the judge advocate. Instead he brought out Brown's view, prior to the meeting, that he was commanding an entirely efficient ship with high-grade officers and crew. Asked how he would then have rated the loyalty of his officers as a body, the captain said unhesitatingly: "Above average."

"So when the events which led to the charge took place, they came as a complete shock to you, sir?"

Brown hesitated, clearly trying to give an entirely honest answer. "Yes," he said at last. "The mutiny did come as a surprise. With certain other crews I might not have been surprised . . . with this one, yes. I thought they'd have obeyed *any* order."

"Would you give a brief assessment of Lieutenant Simpson—again, prior to the mutiny?"

"Yes. I found him capable and painstaking. An executive officer of the old-fashioned type, concerned first and foremost that his job was done as efficiently as possible."

"Old-fashioned, commander?"

Brown looked at Simpson, who did not meet his gaze. "I don't mean that as a condemnation. Quite the reverse. Mr. Simpson never showed any of the modern clock-watching tendency which seems to be creeping even into the Navy."

WINTERSET, Paton had to admit, was doing a good job for Simpson. The implication was: if such an officer rebelled against an order, anyone would rebel against that particular order. And he created this impression by the testimony of the captain against whom Simpson had mutinied.

It must have been the coolest mutiny in history. Apparently hardly a voice had been raised.

The next witness was Schneider, a signalman. Paton called him instead of one of the officers because Schneider was evidently

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not very bright and would probably be incapable of hiding anything there was to hide.

And so it proved.

"How were you told," Paton asked, "that there would be no landing on Frobisher?"

"One of the officers came and told us." Schneider was a tubby, nervous man who breathed noisily and very fast. Since his health must be excellent, his difficulty with his breathing could be ascribed to anxiety and awe.

"Which officer?"

"I don't remember."

"Court would like to caution the witness," said Merchant, rather to Paton's annoyance. Paton wanted to put the signalman at his ease and then trick him. Merchant was liable to frighten the life out of him.

After the president had warned Schneider that he must reply truthfully and without evasion, Paton continued. But he didn't press for the name of the officer.

Instead he said: "What did he tell you?"

"Oh, that it was all right, that we didn't have to land, sir."

"Were you relieved?"

"*Yes*, sir."

"Why?"

"Nobody ever came back from Frobisher, sir."

"Who told you that?"

The signalman looked confused. "It's so, isn't it?"

"So this officer told you it was all right, you didn't have to land?"

"That's what I said, sir. And that's what he said."

"How long before this did you know that the ships mission was to explore Frobisher?"

The signalman wet his lips and his eyes darted about. "We didn't know, sir."

"Come now," said Paton gently. "You were relieved when an officer told you it was all right, you didn't have to land on Frobisher after all. You must have known before then that the captain was going to order a landing."

"It was a rumor, sir."

"How long had this rumor been going round?"

"I don't remember."

"A day? A week? From the start of the voyage?"

The tubby signalman looked trapped. Paton cast a quick glance at Simpson. The exec was staring calmly at the ceiling.

"It was a rumor," Schneider said stubbornly.

Paton let it go at that and Winterset had no questions.

THE next witness was Lieutenant James Kramp, next in seniority to Simpson. He was a tall, fair-haired, All-American boy.

"Lieutenant," said Paton, "how many consultations did the officers of the *Mirror* hold before refusing to obey Captain Brown?"

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The Lieutenant started at the abrupt attack. "None," he said. "We didn't know until that moment what our mission really was."

"The crew did," Paton observed. "Lieutenant, are you asking us to believe that the captain of a naval ship gave an order and twenty-six officers and men spontaneously refused to obey it?"

"That's how it happened," said Kramp.

Merchant held up his hand. He glowered at Kramp, who wilted. "If," said Merchant grimly, "there is further evidence that officers and men of the *Mirror* are involved in a conspiracy to prevent the true facts of this incident becoming known, you will all be held indefinitely until such time as you are prepared to testify fully and truthfully."

"Yes, sir," said Kramp, abashed.

"How long," Paton demanded, "was the ship's mission known to you, lieutenant?"

Kramp surrendered. "Almost from the beginning. As a rumor."

"Who circulated this rumor?"

"Nobody started it. You know how rumors are. The word was we were en route to Frobisher."

"Why, then, did you wait until the ship was actually in orbit around Frobisher before making any stand?"

"Well, we weren't supposed to know. The rumor might be wrong. A dozen things might happen to prevent us landing on Frobisher."

"But it was previously agreed among you all that if and when the captain ordered a landing on Frobisher, every one of you would refuse?"

"Yes."

"How many expeditions have there been to Frobisher?"

"Five."

"With what result?"

"The first got away all right. But that was fifty years ago, and all the men who went on that landing party are dead now. Since then there have been four landings and nobody's ever come up again."

"How do you know, lieutenant?"

"Huh?"

"How do you know? Who told you?'

"I just know."

"Wasn't it Lieutenant Simpson who told you?"

"It may have been."

"How did he know?"

Winterset objected: How could Kramp testify to the knowledge of the accused? The objection was sustained.

Merchant asked if the judge advocate's questioning of this witness was likely to be lengthy. Guessing what was coming, Paton took a chance and said yes. The president then recessed the court.

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AT the afternoon session Paton had a bulky folder which he had not had that morning. He also had an air of resolution which he had not had either. He didn't quite know where he was going yet, but he knew now that he was going somewhere.

"Lieutenant," he said to Kramp, "I'm going to show you a picture. I want you to tell me if you recognize anyone in it."

A photograph was handed to the witness. It showed about a dozen men in a group pose. Kramp looked at it for a long time. Then he said: "This man here looks something like Lieutenant Simpson."

Paton, watching Simpson, saw the first trace of uneasiness. Simpson didn't like this. He was quite happy about being on trial for mutiny, even about being accused of being the ringleader. But he didn't like photographs being produced.

"Something like Mr. Simpson?" Paton said.

"It might be Simpson."

"Do you know who the men in that photograph are, lieutenant?"

"No."

"They are the men who landed on Frobisher fifty years ago."

There is never a sensation in a court martial as there often is in a criminal court. There are no public seats and the whole atmosphere is stiffly military. But when Paton spoke, there was near sensation in the room. The court members looked at each other, half startled, half outraged, several of them on the point of protesting about having their legs pulled.

Simpson settled in his chair. It was hard to tell whether he was calmly accepting disaster or relieved to find the judge advocate on entirely the wrong track.

Kramp was honestly bewildered. "Then it can't be Simpson," he said.

"Why not, lieutenant?"

"Well . . . this man here was forty or so fifty years ago. If he were alive he'd be ninety now."

The photograph was passed around the court. Merchant examined it closely and then glowered at Simpson.

Simpson and Winterset conferred in whispers, and then the defense counsel rose. Addressing Merchant, he said that accused was prepared to testify now if the court wished, to attempt to dispose of the matter of the photograph.

There was quick agreement, Kramp was dismissed, and Simpson was sworn.

Paton said: "Your name is David Simpson?"

"Yes."

"Not Henry McQueen Bailey?"

"If you'll let me speak—Bailey was my grandfather. My mother's father. It's not surprising

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there should be a resemblance, is it?"

Paton consulted another paper in his folder. "Please explain why your mother's maiden name is entered on your service record as Herbert."

Simpson was not so calm now. He looked hot. "Well, to tell the truth, my mother was illegitimate. She took her mother's name."

"Ah, thank you, lieutenant," Paton said. "That relieves me of the necessity of asking you why no daughter of Bailey is on record. Bailey died forty-seven years ago, did he not, just three years after returning from Frobisher?

"That's right."

"So your mother must have been born long before he went to Frobisher?"

"Obviously," Simpson retorted. "She was twenty when I was born, forty-two years ago."

"And when did she die?"

"If you have my service record, you should know. On March 21, 2133."

"Lieutenant," said the judge advocate, "I now have to ask you to explain some very peculiar things. Your mother's birth and death and your own birth are all stated to be registered at Pinkton, Ohio—where there happened to be a fire twenty-nine years ago which destroyed all records. You entered the Navy just three years ago—"

"Wrong," said Simpson. "I entered the Navy twenty years ago."

"Yes, but at Carson Base, near the Seefarne system. Carson Base was blown up three years ago when an atomic drive went wild. All Carson Base records being destroyed, when you reported for naval duty here on Earth, the Navy only had your word for it that you'd ever been in the Space Navy at all."

Winterset rose. "Objection," he said. "Accused is standing trial for his part in a mutiny. Not for having his personal records destroyed in fires or accidents."

"Objection overruled," said Merchant sharply. "Continue, judge advocate."

"Since you know your mother was the illegitimate daughter of Henry McQueen Bailey," Paton said, "a thing we'd hardly expect you to know, but let that pass—you may also know other things about Bailey."

"I don't," said Simpson quickly.

"For example, how he died. Do you know that?"

"He was lost in a sailing accident."

"Exactly. Lost at sea. In other words, his body was never found. Let me tell you another strange thing. *All* the men who returned from Frobisher with Bailey died within five years. And all in acci-

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dents of some sort. In two or three cases they identified each other's bodies."

WINTERSET wanted to object again, in a sense quite rightly, for Paton was straying very widely from the events which had brought Simpson to trial. But the expression on the president's face showed defense counsel it would be a waste of time to object.

"You joined the Navy three years ago as a junior grade lieutenant—" Paton began.

"I told you," Simpson interrupted, "I joined the Navy at Carson Base twenty years ago."

"But only the last three years are currently on record. Your service record, such as it is, shows that you have spent most of your career as an exploration party leader. Your alleged Carson Base naval career fitted you so well for this work that you could scarcely have been given any other duties. In other words, you've spent three years making sure that when the next naval exploration team was sent to Frobisher, you'd be a member of it."

"This is complete nonsense," said Simpson angrily. "Who would have thought another exploration team would be sent to Frobisher, anyway? Isn't it obvious by this time that the place is a deathtrap? There won't be another ship sent to land an exploration party there, ever."

"You mean," Paton said quietly, "there *wouldn't* have been another party sent after this episode, after every spaceman, civil or military, knew that four expeditions had been lost and that the last one mutinied rather than land."

Without giving Simpson a chance to say anything, he changed his tone and asked sharply: "Can you produce a single witness who knew you more than three years ago?"

"I've told you, I was serving with the Navy at Carson Base—"

"If you were, lieutenant, you must have run into many hundreds of navymen who weren't blown up with the base. Please name twenty or so and I'll arrange to have some of them subpoenaed."

Simpson hesitated and then shrugged. "Well, there's Lieutenant Plower—Butch Plower. And Harry Benson. And John Maddin. And Bill Steward. And—"

"Just a minute, lieutenant. Further details, please. What did Plower look like? And Benson?"

"Well, Plower was a jg like me, big red-headed guy who used to be a navigator but moved to communications. Benson was an ensign nine years ago, fat, with a bald patch. Maddin . . ."

Paton listened attentively as Simpson spoke. Winterset looked at the ceiling and at his boots and sighed in protest. He hadn't been

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keen to defend a mutineer, but he had expected a normal trial in which he could knock a few holes in the prosecution case without committing himself in any way to approval of what Simpson had done.

"Thank you, lieutenant," Paton said at last. "We'll try to trace some of these men. Particularly Benson."

"Why Benson?" Simpson asked suspiciously.

"He can give the whole story of your Carson Base service, can't he? He was the navigator who moved to communications later?"

Simpson hesitated, seeing the trap. "No, that was Maddin."

"Are you sure? I thought you said—"

"No, Benson, I mean."

PATON turned to the court stenographer. Before he could speak, Simpson burst out: "It was years ago, I may have gotten these guys mixed up a bit."

"Then let's start at the beginning again," said Paton pleasantly. "Who was the fat ensign who worked with you seven years ago?"

"The court will question the witness," Merchant said. "Mr. Simpson, Lieutenant Baker here tells me that only about a hundred officers and men were killed in the Carson Base disaster. In a naval career lasting seventeen years there you must have encountered a great many men who were not killed in that tragedy. You must, indeed, have met several of them recently. . . . If you really did serve at Carson Base for seventeen years you should be able to prove it very easily. Can you?"

"Nothing to say," said Simpson sullenly.

Merchant's eyebrows went up. "It is contempt of court to refuse to answer a question."

"Nothing to say."

Winterset stood up and pointed out that Simpson was on trial on charges arising out of a mutiny. If he was now to be charged with impersonating a naval officer, the defense would like notice of the fact.

Merchant looked at the judge advocate. "The proceedings have become very irregular," he said. "The court would like the judge advocate to explain his tactics. What is his contention?"

"That Lieutenant Simpson arranged to be an officer on the ship assigned to explore Frobisher," Paton said. "That he deliberately sabotaged the project, the nature of which was known throughout the ship from the start of the voyage despite the supposed secrecy of the captain's orders. That he fradulently represented himself three years ago as a naval officer from Carson Base, with a false record of exploration experience designed to get himself assigned

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to the exploration ship which would eventually be sent to Frobisher."

"With what motive?" the president asked.

"I suggest that he is in fact Henry McQueen Bailey; that he and the other members of the original exploration team found something on Frobisher that they decided to keep to themselves; that they left Frobisher and made a discouraging report, knowing that if they remained on the planet other landings would be made; that they arranged a series of accidental 'deaths' and then returned one by one to Frobisher; that since then one or other of them has left Frobisher at intervals and sabotaged all attempts at exploration; that their long-term purpose was to make exploration of the planet appear so dangerous that no further landings would be made."

There was a pause. "That's a remarkable theory," said the president, with considerable understatement.

"If the court will allow me some latitude," Paton said, "I think some corroborative evidence might be elicited from other witnesses. It is not my contention that all the officers and men on board the *Mirror* conspired to prevent a landing, possessing information about Frobisher which is not generally available. I submit that Simpson, claiming knowledge acquired during his alleged Carson Base service, systematically convinced the entire ship's company that nobody who landed on the planet would ever get away alive."

"What sort of latitude do you want?" Merchant said bluntly.

"I want to press the other witnesses for details of conversations which convinced them that landing on Frobisher meant certain death."

"If the court please," Winterset retorted, "I suggest that what the judge advocate wants to do is get the other witnesses to rat on Lieutenant Simpson."

Paton shrugged "If Lieutenant Kramp and the other officers backed Simpson in his refusal to obey a lawful order of Captain Brown, they are not blameless. But there is a considerable difference between refusal to commit suicide and fradulent misrepresentation."

THERE was a long pause. Merchant was clearly puzzled about what to do. The proceedings had already become so irregular that it might be best to convene a new trial. If there was anything in the judge advocate's allegations, a new trial would have to be held anyway.

Although Paton had merely suggested that the other landings on Frobisher had been sabotaged, it was obvious that this

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might have entailed something more serious than fraud. Some fifty men had disappeared. Whatever the truth might be, the chances were that murder formed part of it. . . .

At last Merchant made up his mind. "The court martial will proceed," he said. "If the judge advocate can produce evidence to support these allegations, nothing could be more relevant to the charge against David Simpson. But I would remind him that the present court is concerned only with the *Mirror* mutiny, if such it was."

Simpson was excused and Kramp was recalled.

It was scarcely legal and it was certainly not fair. By adroit questioning, Paton managed to inform Kramp that Simpson was now suspected of something much wider and more serious than his part in the *Mirror* mutiny, and to suggest that Kramp might become an accessory in these comprehensive crimes if he continued to back Simpson.

Further, by suggesting that the planet Frobisher might not in itself represent any danger to a landing party, the judge advocate cut the ground from under the feet of the mutineers. It was one thing to refuse to obey an order to enter a gas chamber—but quite another matter when it began to appear that the chamber had contained nothing but perfectly good air.

Kramp became uneasy. Clearly he had thought himself on perfectly safe ground. In peacetime it could scarcely be said to be "wilful, without proper authority, and without justifiable cause" to refuse to obey an order which could only result in death, especially when all other orders had been promptly and respectfully obeyed. Even if the Navy decided otherwise, the public would have immense and weighty sympathy with men in such a position.

But if it turned out that the whole thing had been something of a fraud, there would be no sympathy for anybody except Captain Brown.

Pressing his advantage, Paton asked: "When did Simpson first tell you that you were on a suicide mission?"

"Well, we knew we were going to Frobisher. And some of us knew about the other expeditions. . . . Simpson was the one that didn't seem to care. I mean, he said we were all going to get killed, but he didn't say anything about refusing to land."

"When did he say you were all going to get killed?"

"From the beginning, I guess. I never thought he was being clever about it, but now . . ." Kramp was having great difficulty in not looking at Simpson.

"Now?" Paton prompted.

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"Well, maybe he *was* very clever. I mean, the way he acted, Frobisher was suicide but he did not seem to think of not landing until the rest of us began to get the idea. It was our idea, not his."

"Can you remember exactly what he said?"

"When?"

"The first time he mentioned Frobisher."

"He said 'That's the end of a lot of promising naval careers. They were pretty smart not to give any of us the chance to go sick.'"

"What else did he say?"

"You mean, exactly?"

"Yes, exactly."

"I think I said 'A lot of landing parties come unstuck.' Then he said 'This one for sure. The things I could tell you about the Frobisher landings. . . .'"

PATIENTLY Paton extracted the story of how Simpson, the loyal, resigned exec, had had to be convinced that it was the decision of the officers and men of the *Mirror* that when the captain ordered a landing they should refuse.

Then Paton asked what Simpson had told them about the previous landings. Several times Winterset pointed out wearily that the judge advocate was leading the witness. The president sustained some objections, overruled others. Merchant made no secret of the fact that the court wanted to get to the bottom of the case by whatever methods.

"If the judge advocate fails to produce concrete evidence supporting these new allegations," he said, "the court will ignore all this testimony in reaching a verdict."

Prolonged examination of Kramp failed to reveal anything sinister in Simpson's behavior on the voyage. But it did reveal a great deal of detail which Simpson had given about the five previous landings.

Taking due note of this, Paton kept Kramp on the stand until he could be reasonably sure that the president would adjourn the court without allowing Winterset to begin his cross-examination. Then Paton indicated that he was finished with the witness. And the president duly closed the proceedings.

* * *

The next morning Merchant saw Paton and Winterset privately in an anteroom before the court opened.

"Simpson tried to escape last night," he said. "He got as far as the Mars ship, using the name Joe Abbot, before he was picked up by military police."

Winterset was impassive. "I suggest, sir, that this proves nothing. Whatever the truth of the matter, he's probably decided that he's a dead duck."

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Merchant nodded. "That's my opinion. There may be further charges later, of course. For the present there will be no mention of the accused's attempted escape. Judge advocate, do you have new witnesses?"

"Yes, sir."

"In the circumstances, I think you'd better tell us both what you expect them to prove."

"I'm not sure I want to be in on this," Winterset said. His manner, normally somewhat cold, was rather more aloof than usual. "I guess it's no secret that I was never particularly keen to defend these men. All the same, it's my duty to say anything that can be said in Simpson's defense, and attack the judge advocate's case at all points. I think I can do it better if my hands aren't tied."

"It's only my opinion," said Merchant with dry sarcasm, "but don't you think you can defend better if you've some idea what you're defending against?"

"The new allegations by the judge advocate are utterly fantastic," Winterset declared. "Simpson may be a mutineer, but that's all he is. However, if you insist, sir, I'll listen to what the judge advocate hopes to prove."

"I have expert testimony on all the Frobisher landings," Paton said. "I expect it to show that what Simpson allegedly told the officers of the *Mirror* was true —indeed, remarkably true. So true, accurate and complete that Simpson will have great difficulty in explaining how he acquired his information."

Winterset shrugged. "If that's all, I can't see how it harms Simpson. First you said he told lies to prevent the landing. Now you say he told the truth to prevent the lanching."

"That isn't all. . . ." Paton began.

Merchant interrupted. "You must admit," he said to Winterset, "that such knowledge on Simpson's part supports the allegation that he was deliberately placed on the ship assigned to explore Frobisher and that he may in fact be Henry Bailey."

Winterset shook his head. "No more than it supports his own statement that he served for seventeen years at Carson Base."

Merchant shrugged. "You two gentlemen will have an opportunity to argue this out in court. You said you had further testimony, judge advocate?"

Paton hesitated. "I have a very important witness . . . I'm quite ready to tell you all about him, but I don't want defense counsel to warn Simpson."

Winterset stood up. "This conference wasn't my idea," he said coldly. "I'm quite prepared to test evidence, fantastic or otherwise, as it arises."

He nodded to the other two and went out.

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"I'd be interested to hear about this witness," the president said.

Paton told him.

IN the opening minutes Winterset probed Kramp's story very thoroughly. He caught him out in minor contradictions, but failed to shake him. Kramp gave the impression of being a reluctant witness who had finally decided that the only thing to do was to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

When Kramp left the stand, Paton called James Norton Bailey.

Simpson couldn't help bucking like a startled horse. Even Winterset jumped. The defense counsel had been expecting a parade of expert witnesses on the previous Frobisher landings, men who had been on the ships concerned but not in the landing parties.

James Bailey entered. And there was a second sensation. For he looked exactly as Simpson would look in thirty years' time.

Bailey was sworn and Paton asked him at once: "Do you know this man?"

"It's unbelievable," said Bailey, "but I could swear it's my brother Harry."

"Why is it unbelievable?"

"Because Harry was twenty years older than me. All the same . . . Hell, it must be Harry."

The president looked as if he was on the point of intervening. Paton said quickly: "When did you last see your brother?"

"After he came back from Frobisher."

"Assuming that this man here is your brother," Paton said, "can you explain why he should be so surprised to see you?"

"Well, I guess because he thought I was dead."

"Explain that, please."

"About the time he was killed . . . at least, about the time he was supposed to be killed . . . I was on a scouting trip on Venus. I was reported missing. And yet . . ."

Bailey shook his head, puzzled. He was an old man. The contrast between him and Simpson, allegedly some twenty years older than James Bailey, made Paton's story seem ridiculous.

"But you turned up," Paton prompted.

"Yes. There was a big story in all the papers about a year after Harry was killed. I mean . . . Anyway, what I don't get is, where was he? If he wasn't dead, he must have seen the story in the papers and wouldn't be surprised I'm still around. I just don't know . . ."

Simpson stood up. "Okay, I'll tell you," he said resignedly.

The president looked hard at him. "You want to make a statement?"

"I guess so."

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"I'd like to have a consultation with the accused," said Winterset.

"What's the use? Maybe he hasn't got me"—nodding at Paton—"but he knows the truth and he's going to keep on till he has. Anyway, I guess the truth had to come out sometime. And it isn't so bad as you've all been trying to make out."

James Bailey was dismissed, still looking puzzled. And Simpson began his story.

"I'm Harry Bailey all right. There was nothing funny about that first exploration trip. It was half Navy, half civilian—things were done differently in those days.

"We landed at the north pole and found ourselves in a warm, comfortable region, not too overgrown because there's a kind of grass that can take on every other kind of vegetation and beat it. At the pole, anyway, there's a nice balance between trees and bushes and grass.

"Right away we met the local inhabitants. They were a kind of big green slug . . . "They came towards us, about fifty of them —and though they didn't look dangerous, we moved right back to the ship. Somebody shouted 'Keep back!'—and they did.

"We couldn't understand it. They stopped just as if they understood. Curious, somebody else shouted 'Move five feet forward and then stop.' Well, they did that too. All of them.

"I'm cutting this short, so I won't tell you all that happened in detail. In a few hours we knew that the Frobs—we called them that because they lived on Frobisher—would do exactly as we told them. More than that, we didn't even have to tell them. If we simply thought things at them, they did them. They were telepaths, obviously, able to pick up strong thoughts.

THE Frobs didn't have any will of their own. We were never able to study them in their natural state, for whenever we were near them they did everything we wanted them to do and nothing we didn't want them to do. They didn't seem to be a high life form. All they did was eat, sleep and reproduce. They were not too good at reproducing and we later found they live for hundreds of years. The pattern became clear since they live so long and have no natural enemies, nature doesn't let them reproduce more than just enough to replace losses. There were only about a couple of thousand of them on the whole planet, mostly around the two poles.

"All this time our party was simply acting like any landing party. We couldn't communicate with the orbiting ship because of the layer that stops radio waves.

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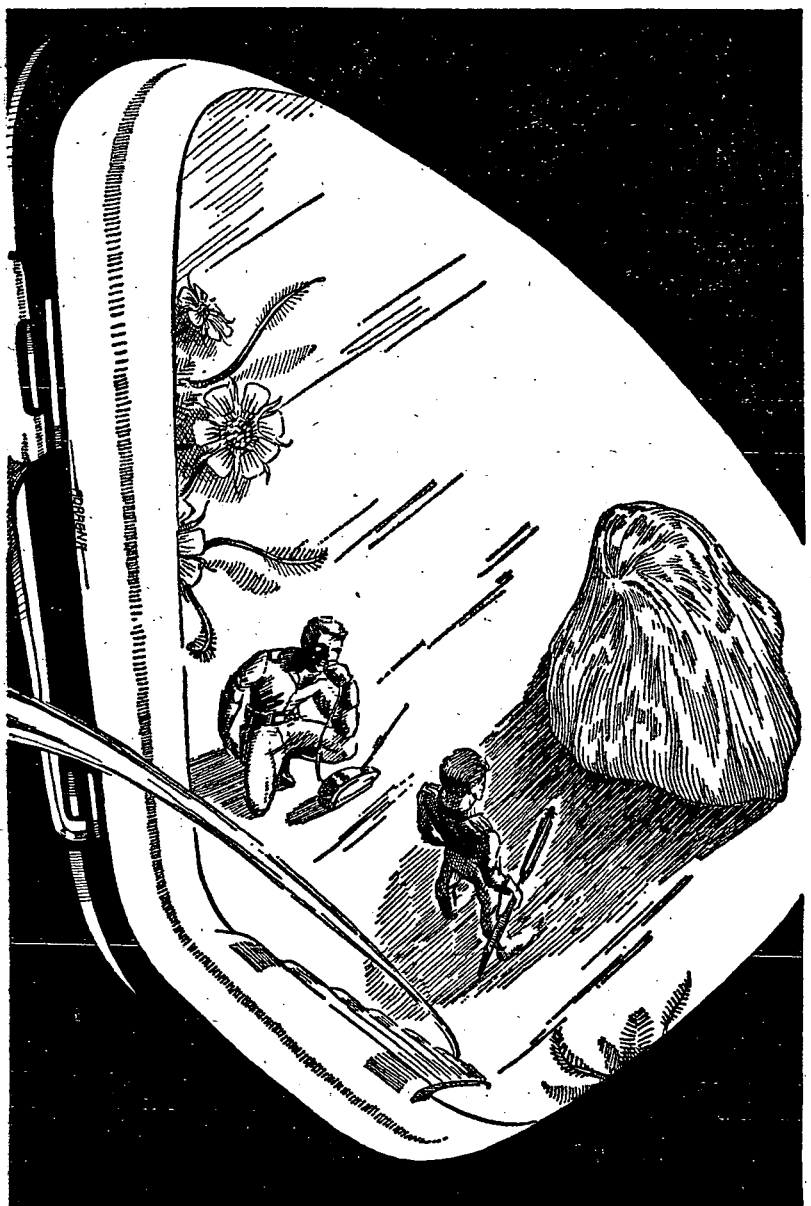

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Since bacteria might be a danger, we were supposed to stay for a minimum of three weeks if at all possible and then go back up and report. Depending on what we reported, there might be another landing, some of us might be left to form a settlement, or we might all return to base and make a full report there.

"That first week we'd have told the parent ship all there was to tell if we could. It was only after that that we began to get ideas . . .

"Apart from the Frobs, the planet was a harmless, peaceful, not very interesting world. Mineral wealth in the region we surveyed was poor. We could live on the vegetables and fruits that grew wild, but there was no meat apart from the Frobs. We tried that, discovering in the process that our control over the Forbs was so complete that they'd kill themselves if we ordered them to.

"Frob flesh was fair, nothing special. We didn't know then, of course, that we were killing off creatures that had lived for a couple of hundred years and might live for another century or two if we let them.

"Anyway, before we learned this we found a much better source of meat. The best there is in the galaxy, I guess.

"You could call it Frob eggs. Embryos, really, without a shell. Frobs regularly produce sterile embryos. Although they don't know much, they know at once when an embryo is going to live, and then look after it. In fact, the one thing a Frob won't do is give up a live embryo. It figures —there's nothing more valuable to the Frobs than live embryos, because they're so rare. They killed themselves when we told them, but they wouldn't let us touch baby Frobs.

"The sterile embryos, on the other hand, they just leave lying around to rot. Only they don't rot, they simply dry up, and they take a long time to do that.

"When we started eating sterile Frob embryos, we knew we were on to something. It's the tastiest and most versatile meat there is. You can boil it, fry it, roast it, grill it, stew it, and it tastes different every time. It even tastes different if you fry it slow or fry it fast. The only way you can spoil it is to burn it.

FROBISHER still wasn't much of a world, as far as we were concerned. It wasn't until the oldest man among us, Ben Patella, began to get younger that we began to get really interested.

"There wasn't any doubt about it. His hair started growing in dark again. He straightened up and ran around like a boy. And

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then he began talking about women . . .

"Married men aren't sent on expeditions, you know. Very few of us had any strong connections anywhere. As far as women were concerned, we took what we could get wherever we happened to be. And when we talked about living on Frobisher, naturally the main thing we had against the place was that there were no women and probably wouldn't be for a long time.

"Ben, who hadn't used to care, felt it worst. He couldn't wait to get back to civilization and find himself a girl.

"Then we found the Forbs starting to change. They got longer and thinner and developed flippers. Before that they'd moved like snakes. They began to make noises as if they were trying to talk.

"Temperamentally, if you could say Frobs had a temperament, they were still the same. They were completely dominated by us. Gradually we established that they had a certain intelligence—Berger, the biologist, thought they actually developed intelligence to please us. Later he reached the conclusion that they'd had latent intelligence which they might have needed at some period in their history but didn't use now because they did not need it any more. Their intelligence, however, didn't make them stand up against us, they used it in our service. They brought us all their sterile embryos, which stayed the same in form even when the parent Frobs looked quite different.

"By the time our three weeks were up it was obvious the Forbs were trying to make themselves like us—and succeeding. We were so curious we decided to stay a while longer and see what happened.

"We were beginning to *like* the Frobs. At first there hadn't been anything to like, any more than you like a machine which simply does what you make it do. But imagine a dog with more brains than a dog, a dog that loves you and does everything you want it to do, using all its time and energy to find new ways of pleasing you. I guess we all love power.

WHEN one smart guy among us got the bright idea of using the Frobs to get power over the rest of us, he found it didn't work. The Forbs didn't read our minds, exactly, but they had ways of knowing what we wanted as a body rather than as individuals. And that's what they obeyed. If one of us gave an order they'd obey it, whatever it was—unless it was something that ran right against the general concensus of opinion among us.

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"Although we didn't talk about it, I guess some of us were beginning to get at the back of our minds vague ideas that led to what we eventually did. If only there weren't certain obvious snags about Frobisher it could be *home* for us . . . eleven men who didn't have a home, who had volunteered for exploration because they had no strong social ties. Yet it was obvious that the Frobisher we knew wasn't going to last. The Frobs would all get killed, unless their reproduction cycle speeded up. As I said, everybody loves power. And strangers arriving on Frobisher wouldn't be able to resist telling Frobs to kill themselves just to see them do it.

"We knew now how many Frobs there were and how few births there were. We didn't harm them any more, not only because we liked them but also because if you've got any respect for life you don't kill off rare creatures.

"But others would experiment the way we had, at first. Before the thing happened that made us decide what we did, there was already talk among us about trying to put off colonization of Frobisher, just for the sake of the Frobs.

"Then one day we saw exactly what the Frobs were doing. They knew what we wanted, what their world in our eyes lacked. And as always they tried to please us. Because of their curious physical structure they were able to do it . . .

"They were turning into women."

SIMPSON or Bailey, paused to drink a glass of water. Nobody said anything. The court wanted the truth: now they were getting it. Simpson had shown himself to be a poor liar. Once or twice earlier he had seen what looked like an explanation of something that cried out for explanation, and jumped at it. Then he found, as all poor liars do, that he had only created more questions demanding more explanations.

He had been convincing on the *Mirror* because what he told his mates was the truth, if not the whole truth. He was convincing now because his story flowed easily, sounding at all points like recollection and not fabrication.

"There were only eleven of us," he said. "That's what made it possible. A bigger party could not have reached agreement. Somebody would have stood out. I guess it was a coincidence, at that, that eleven of us thought more or less the same way.

"Originally we were only going to lie about the planet to save the Frobs. We'd talked that out and were quite sure that if there

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were big landings the Frobs would go the way of the buffalo.

"But another thing was the way the planet made Ben Patella young again. He didn't go all the way—eventually he looked about forty. What did it we didn't know, though the biologist guessed it was the Frob meat. Frob cells were more adaptable than any that had been encountered in the galaxy before.

"Of course we didn't know if Ben would grow old again the moment he left the planet. Yet it seemed fairly clear that so long as he stayed there he'd live a long time, maybe as long as the Frobs.

"I guess some people will say a thing like this should have been made known to the whole galaxy. But should it? There were only so many Frobs. The meat they supplied, without killing them for inferior meat, was only about enough for fifty people. For that matter, the whole world wouldn't support a lot of humans, not in natural conditions, anyway.

"Well you know what we did. We had to go back—if we didn't, another landing would be made. We thought of leaving some of us behind and reporting them killed, but that too might lead to further landings. Then, too, if we condemned the planet utterly that would seem strange, especially as we'd spent more than the minimum time there.

So we went back with a discouraging report—Captain Brown told you what we said. All the figures and samples we took back with us were cooked to confirm our story. We gave as a reason for the delay in returning the story that several members of the party had been violently ill.

"Before leavng the planet, we tried to make it clear to the Frobs that we'd be back. And they seemed to understand.

"Patella and a couple of others among us had to hide the changes that had taken place in them. It was easy enough—a thing which is very hard to believe is always very easy to conceal."

Simpson cleared his throat. "I've been talking a long time . . . I'll cut the rest short. Not much more of it is my story anyway . . .

"Patella didn't age again immediately, but there were signs that it wouldn't be long. He never went looking for a girl when we got back to Magellan—he'd lost interest again. He had not lost interest in living, though. He and the other two oldish men among us more or less had their minds made up for them. *They* were going back, anyway.

ON Magellan at that time, as in any new settlement, acci-

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dents and disappearances were frequent. Patella and the other two, with some help from us, managed to arrange a convincing flying accident. Their copter crashed in a ravine and went on fire. As far as I know, nobody ever got to it. Even if they had, and found no bodies, it wouldn't seem too strange. It would be assumed that the men had got out of the wreck but not out of the ravine. And it was a big cleft.

"Those three went back in an old space-barge. The rest of us went our ways . . . within five years we'd all managed to get back to Frobisher."

"One question." The president interrupted for the first time. "Are you telling us everything? That the three old men would want to get back is understandable. But all of you?"

"We had made arrangements to communicate," Simpson said. "The space-barge was only good for one trip. But the biologist got hold of a powerful little tender. She made frequent trips between Magellan and Frobisher. We had a private mail office on Magellan —there are always plenty of strangers coming and going in a new colony, and we were able to keep in touch.

"When the next landing was made ten years later, we were ready for it. I know what you've been thinking, but you're wrong —there was no killing. We persuaded the eight men who landed to stay with us. And the fourteen who came next."

"How?" Merchant demanded, baffled. "You've painted no picture of a Garden of Eden. Why were so many men—able, trusted men—so easily persuaded to throw up everything for life on Frobisher?"

"I didn't tell you about the women," Simpson said reflectively. "The kind of women the Frobs became. I guess I can't ever explain this to you, but I'll try. First, they were the most beautiful girls anyone ever saw. that's not so difficult to understand when you realize the Frobs could see into our minds and that they had no desire except to please us . . . Imagine a world of beautiful girls with no selfishness, no jealousy, no meanness. No character either, you might think, but remember they spent all their time trying to figure out what we wanted and how to supply it.

"Well, maybe it was a dream world. Maybe there was no reality about it. The Frob girls only looked like lovely girls. Yet the pretense was so good, so complete, that we were satisfied.

"They gave us children too—not many, for the Frobs still can't reproduce often. And we had to wait while the embryos, kept out of our sight, developed into human children. Mostly

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girls, for most of us wanted girl children. But some of them were boys. I've got a son . . ."

The president once more failed to contain himself. "And you were satisfied with that? A life of pretense, among aliens?"

"They're not aliens," said Simpson patiently. "I've told you what Frobisher is like, to us. What is it if it's not the Garden of Eden?"

THERE was a pause. The men who went on exploration trips, Paton reflected, civil or naval, were usually men dissatisfied with the civilization and society they knew, seekers after . . . not truth, but what they would like the truth to be. Secret cities and gold and beautiful women. Well, for once some of them had found what they were looking for.

"After the third landing," Simpson went on, "there were thirty-one of us. Two were killed working on the space-barge, trying to convert it for planetside transport. We had a lot of knowledge and experience to call on. And we still wanted to keep Frobisher to ourselves. Selfish, maybe, yet time confirmed a lot of our early ideas. Frobisher was Eden for about fifty men who thought as we did. More would destroy it. Other ideas, other goals, other personalities would destroy it."

He sighed. "I guess in the end we had to fail . . . as I've failed. Some of us went on the other two landing parties, having worked themselves into them the way I got myself on the *Mirror* expedition. *They* didn't fail. They managed to influence the choice of men to land so that only men who thought as we did landed. That took us up to fifty-one—three more were killed when a building collapsed. We weren't very good builders, at first.

"My job was different. I guess it was too big for me.

"We knew by this time that anyone who had spent a long time on Frobisher could take up to five years away from it without ageing. There was a lot of planning. . . We wanted to stop further landings by spreading the story that Frobisher was certain death. The fact that four landings had apparently ended in complete disaster helped, of course. What the judge advocate said was true enough—I was in the Navy fifty years ago, but not for those seventeen years at Carson Base."

He shrugged. "Well, there's nothing more to say, is there? I tried. I expected to be discharged for my part in the mutiny, and then I'd be free to get back to Frobisher. That was all arranged. Further sabotage of exploration teams, as you called

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it, wouldn't be my job. Others would keep in touch with Magellan and do what was necessary.

"But I failed. Maybe I should have told you nothing. But once you'd guessed so much, I knew it was hopeless. I've told you the truth so that whatever was done about Frobisher now would be done after considreation of the true facts.

"Maybe we were selfish. All the same, the Frobs haven't gone the way of the buffalo, under us. I wonder what's going to happen to them now?"

AT last the president of the court was ready to deliver the court's decision. Merchant said, "Henry McQueen Bailey, you have been found guilty of inciting mutiny. However, the court has carefully considered all the evidence, bearing in mind that the most important part of it is the voluntary statement by the accused. Therefore, Mr. Bailey, you are sentenced to be discharged from the Navy forthwith. You will be returned to the planet Frobisher and in due course consultations will take place with the appointed representatives of the Frobisher colony.

"Certain irregularities have occurred and the fifty-one men you represent cannot be absolved from their responsibility in them. However, the court's ruling, subject to confirmation, is that the Frobisher colony is recognized as a settlement with self-governing rights. Such recognition involves no acquiesence in the acts of this settlement, but merely recognizes the existence of a colonized, developed planet."

More informally, Merchant said: "The galaxy is vast and perhaps the individual's most important right is to be left alone, provided he does not harm others. As you seem to realize yourself, your Garden of Eden is not every man's idea of heaven. However the court is prepared to accept that by your own lights you acted for the best."

Paton smiled. He was not dissatisfied. Had he lost his case, or won it? It was difficult to say.

Simpson, or Bailey, was slowly and joyfully coming to the conclusion that he had won his. He didn't quite believe it yet. The court's ruling was more favorable than he had dreamed possible.

He would return to his world of bliss. He would live forever, surrounded by beautiful, utterly compliant girls, in a world on which there was no strife, nothing but perpetual content.

And Frank Paton, gathering together his papers and slipping them into a folder marked *MIRROR*, did not envy him in the least. It takes all sorts to make a galaxy.

THE END

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Beyond the Line

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

Man has long known that there is but a thin line between opposites: between genius and madness, beauty and ugliness, love and hate. But—where lies that line? In our minds? Or between universes?

NORTH was the direction Helen feared. The Wicked Witch came from there, as did everything that was harsh. The wind's coldest breath. The snow, to lean in drifts against the outer wall. And the unsympathetic north light which shadowed no blemish, spread no wrinkle and showed you—yourself.

Warts and all.

The house, crouched above the valley, had no reason to face such bleakness. It had turned its back on it and looked upon the softer south.

Illustrator FINLAY

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When she moved in, five years earlier, Helen followed its example. She left the back rooms unfurnished.

But there dawns a day in everyone's life when they feel they can't run away any more. When, as William James wrote, a person "can *stand* this Universe." And must or perish. For the worst must be faced, then outfaced.

This was the day for Helen. She dumped her cosmetics in the ashcan, to the last lipstick. She unhooked the pink-tinged looking glass, which had flattered her complexion, and stuffed it in a closet. She threw out all the lamp-shades.

Then moved, bag and baggage, bed and bedding, into the larger of the back rooms. From narrow gaps around the window frame, the icy drafts stabbed and sliced. But they weren't as sharp as the pain in her soul when she stared at herself in the tall, plain mirror in the stark north light.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall,
Who is fairest of all?"

Cynicism twisted her thin lips as she spoke and made her ugly indeed. Thinness and dissymmetry, her twin blights. So, her nose was thin. Did it also have to droop and infuse her expression with superciliousness? Her eyes were mean slits. Did one also have to slant, simulating cunning? Her shoulders were bony. Must one, then, out-top the other and accentuate the grotesqueness?

"I, that am curtailed of this
fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world,
scarce half made up . . ."

There was intense force in her delivery, though she'd bitten out the lines countless times. Even as a child, alone in her bedroom, she had masochistically acted Richard the Third descanting on his deformity. Younger still, though, before introspection came, she lived the fairy tales she read, picturing herself as the beautiful princess awaiting rescue. Or as Cinderella.

Disillusionment came within minutes of her opening her mouth about it to her infant schoolmates.

"Why, Hel En," (Kay always made two syllables of it), "you look more like an Ugly Sister."

"Both of them rolled up," capped the cruel, pretty Rosie.

"No, she looks like the Wicked Witch of the North," decided Kay on second thoughts.

A moment of traumatic shock. Free expression was frozen forever. The lonely life began. Helen imagined people avoided her company because she was repulsive in aspect. The truth was that she was so completely withdrawn that she gave people nothing. And

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they assumed they were dismissed as unimportant.

Isolation was simple. She was an only child. By the time she was sixteen, both her parents were dead and she was receiving a sizeable income from a trust fund. At twenty-one she inherited a million dollar estate. At all times, privacy could be bought—and she bought it.

She had a second-string income. She wrote fairy stories under a pseudonym and they sold well. But now the market for princesses, witches, and elves was drying up. The kids preferred space-fiction. At twenty-six she felt she was not only a misfit but also an anachronism.

Right, then, the time for make-believe was past. Mr. James, here I come, out of the mists of wishful dreaming. I am a woman, not a child, and there is love in me which can't feed forever on narcissism. I need a mate, who will accept me for what I am and not what I pretend to be.

But first I must face and accept myself. . . .

WHEN Helen was small, her mother periodically made her clear out her toy closet.

"Those bricks can go to the Children's Hospital, Ellie. You're too old for bricks now. My goodness, are you still hoarding those used painting books? The stuffing's coming out of Teddy—he's sick: he *needs* to go to the Hospital. . . .

Painful partings, sometimes.

This time, no pain. She spent the day throwing away the past and gone. All the books of her own fairy stories. The liquor which drew a rosy veil over life. The drugs to alleviate the consequent hangover. The fine outdoor clothes she scarcely ever wore outdoors. (Every necessity was delivered to the door.) The fine indoor clothes she wore only when playing the child's game of "dressing up."

No more dressing up. No more candy.

When the Spartan life had toughened her morale, she'd go out into the world, dressed like anyone else, and get an ordinary job like anyone else. She could type, cook, sew, paint, decorate . . . and she understood kids. Query: would kids understand her?

Before getting into bed, that night, she spent a long time critically studying her naked body in the tall mirror. A brace might do something for the shoulder. Diet and exercise should take care of the rest of her, pad that rib-cage, round out the skeleton limbs. Plastic surgery could straighten the nose and shorten the chin.

She retired, slept, and dreamed she was the Sleeping Beauty.

In the morning she awakened

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gradually to the fragrance of a hundred tea-roses—as she imagined. But there was only one flower. It lay beside her head on the pillow.

She'd seen no species like it. Its veined crimson leaves clung tightly around the long stalk. Its pink petals dropped like dogs' tongues—they were far longer on one side than on the other. The asymmetry was aesthetically appealing, the color clash wasn't. The sweet, warm smell made her senses swim. She had an opium-dream glimpse into a world of eternal bright sunset, where great patches of flowers in full bloom were barred by the long shadows of high trees. A black speck was drawing a vapor trail across the pink-gold sky. . . .

It fast dissolved. Then she was sitting up, staring apprehensively around the grey, sunless room, wondering about the intruder. How had he (it must have been a man?) got in?

She got up, flung on a robe. The windows were still fastened against the northern blast. She looked around the other rooms. All empty of life. Nothing disturbed. Nothing missing.

She frowned through the picture window upon the valley. The tiny town down there was a mere blur on the white. Snowflakes streamed on the wind.

The valley was isolated, the roads snow-blocked. The man must have climbed up from the town. Maybe right now he was eating breakfast down there.

No footprints in the snow visible: doubtless covered by the continuing fall. No signs of forced entry: he must have picked the lock.

But what was the point of the escapade? A silly wager in a bar with his mates? She flushed at the thought. It prevented her from calling the police. She shrank from the hidden grins in court. . . .

Yet no fool could have fostered such strange, beautiful blooms. It could only have come from a hot-house. Who possessed such a thing in that dull little town?

She retrieved the flower and set it in a vase. Slowly through the day it lost its sheen, wilted, and finally died, embrowned petals falling. She'd never seen such rapid botanical decomposition. It was as though the flower were poisoned.

An unadmitted hope died with it. Secretly, she'd desired to see this man. Whether his gift was derisive or just plain crazy, it had seemed to convey a promise. The promise was gone.

Therefore, she hesitated before finally fixing the chain on the front door. She checked all window fastenings, then went to bed and slept dreamlessly.

Next morning, the same wonderful fragrance awakened her.

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An identical bloom lay on her pillow. Sap oozed from its stalk. It had just been plucked and was quivering with life.

OF course, she could have assumed the room was haunted, and moved back to the south side, where no mystery had troubled her. But that would be a step backwards into escapism. Problems, to an adult, were to be solved, not dodged.

This was a problem: the door chain hadn't been touched.

Although she'd given the house a face-lift when she bought it, fundamentally it remained pretty old. There was a story that in the 'twenties it was owned by a bootlegger. Could be he'd built himself a bolt-hole, now somebody's secret entrance. She spent the day trying to detect it. She thumped walls, measured them, drew plans to scale, and levered up floorboards. She discovered dry rot and nothing else. There was no space for anything else.

That night she lay awake but feigning sleep. There was a torch under her pillow ready to flash on the intruder. But the day's hard labor had tired her. Despite herself, she dozed.

She dreamed she was in that lotus-land where the red sun was poised above the horizon but never sank. Where night and the stars belonged to another clime beyond the eastern rim of this world.

She was in a perfumed garden. The multivaried flowers were almost bursting from its confines, climbing over and half obscuring a low, pleasant house nearby.

She had a companion. Physically, the prince of her childish fairy tale fantasies. Tall and muscular, black-haired and blue-eyed, like a handsome Celt. The difference was the air of alert intelligence and practicality associated with a first-rate technician.

He said, affectionately: "Hello, Lamb. I've been looking forward to this. This time we can talk."

All her nervousness of strangers returned.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Lothar. I sent you flowers."

The thought of this man nocturnally inspecting her as she slept silenced her.

"If a man wishes to let a woman know he desires to mate with her, he gives her a flower," said Lothar. "That's our custom."

She remained silent.

Lothar smiled. "She gives *him* a flower in return if she accepts him." He paused. "This is my garden, Lamb. I planted these flowers. I should like you to think of them as yours."

The hint was gracefully offered. But she perceived that be-

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hind his calm kindness lay expectancy. And knew that if that expectancy were rebuffed, she would never see him or this bright world again.

THE new emergent Helen struggled to free herself from the entangling chrysalis shell, the armor of the hurt, withdrawn child. Fear of further hurt conflicted with hope of release from fear. A few days ago, hope would have been defeated, if only because it always had been.

But now, suddenly, it triumphed. She reached and plucked a small, beautiful blossom, not unlike a crocus but not a crocus.

Almost boldly, she gave it to Lothar.

With the act, she seemed to become part of him. She *felt* his tension dissolve. He took her in his arms and kissed her. It was the first time she'd been kissed since her father died.

"Thank you, Lamb."

"Why do you call me 'Lamb'?"

His smile returned. "I don't know your name. But when first I saw you, I said to myself: Ah, a lost lamb. I must help her. Then I fell in love with you and wanted you for myself. Tomorrow night, the night after the troth, according to custom, I shall come for you and bring you here—*really* here. And we'll live in my house."

"This is such a vivid dream, Lothar, that I feel I'm really here already. Maybe it's just dreamland getting back at me because I abandoned it. It's snaring me again . . . and I love it. But the awakening will be cruel this time. I'll need all my courage to face daylight."

"Dreamers aren't aware they're dreaming, Lamb. So you're not dreaming. This world is as real as yours. Tomorrow night it will become your real world, for ever."

She looked at him wistfully, trying to believe it.

"But you just implied I wasn't really here."

He smiled wrily. "I meant not entirely here. Not in the flesh. Your mind is here because I'm contacting it telepathically. Tomorrow night you'll be here completely, mind, body, and soul. I shall carry my bride across the threshold—into *our* world."

Like a blindworm, unease began crawling within her.

"You . . . you've seen me in the flesh?"

"Yes, of course. Else how could I have fallen in love with you, Lamb?"

"You've actually been inside my house?"

"No, not exactly. I've seen into it through an instrument called . . . Forget it: it's a cumbersome scientific name. Call it a Viewer. It's a restricted kind of peep-

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hole, though. If you try to swing it around much, it goes right out of focus: you see only a blur. The Mycron Effect. It seems ineradicable. Something to do with the polarization of light in hyperspace. We glimpse clearly only spots here and there of your world through these tubes. Oddly, it's far easier to funnel material objects through than just light. That's how I sent you flowers."

"How long have you been observing me, Lothar?"

She asked from behind a mask of casualness.

"The first time was two nights ago when you stood naked before the mirror. You're the loveliest creature I've ever seen, Lamb, in either world. And you suddenly appeared in a room that had always been empty. When, in the mornings, you leave your bedroom I try to follow you, keep you in sight. But the Viewer fades out even before you reach your bedroom door. I've never seen that door nor what lies beyond it. Still, sketching in the blank areas we've built up a kind of picture of your world. It's so different from our own . . ."

HE went on to tell her about his world, Byre. How, in the three-dimensional universe it lay in a faraway galaxy, its face ever turned to watch its sun. How, in the multi-dimensional universe it lay cheek by jowl with Earth: a mere step through hyperspace . . .

Byre was full of gardens. Extreme miniaturization of power plants had preserved the landscape unspoiled. All machines, all apparatus, were constructed of Units. Units were remarkably versatile blobs of organic matter, imprinted with 10,000 standard electrical circuits.

Units were electronically sorted and aligned to conform to any chosen master pattern. The pattern was everything. It decided which circuits would be used, which 9,999 ignored. Whether the Unit would be negative or positive, repellent or attractive. Whether, with its neighbors, it would be employed as a solid, liquid, or gas.

Lothar was a semi-private experimenter in electronic engineering. Behind the house he had his own laboratory. From there he'd observed Earth. From there, tomorrow, he would step through to Earth for the first time. With the enthusiasm of the specialist, he told her of his method of expanding the force tube . . .

She didn't comprehend a tenth of it but she listened to every word. Simply because she loved the timbre of his voice, the display of his lively intelligence, the flattery of his confiding to her at all. The words were precious because they were numbered now.

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The dream was ending. For, despite her concentration, Byre was fading, the sky darkening, the flowers draining of color, and the figure of Lothar losing clarity.

Telepathy or merely hallucination, the link was parting.

Lothar broke off to call: "Goodbye, my Lamb—just for a little while. After tomorrow, there will never be another . . ."

His voice blurred and died away, and all light went with it.

SHE awoke in darkness in the chill north room. Like Caliban, she cried to dream again. But she was Earth's prisoner, and Earth was as real as the grave—and as relentless.

As she foresaw, the awakening was pain. But in her new philosophy pain must be borne. She clicked on the light and steeled herself to accept bitter truth: Byre could be found in a peyotl button and Lothar was a spinster's fantasy.

So now, woman, swallow that pill, get up—and forget it.

She flung the bedclothes back with the anger of unwilling renunciation.

Simultaneously, a marvelous bouquet materialized in the air not a yard from her nose and flopped lightly onto the bed.

* * *

She sat by the wide front window watching dusk filling the valley. The night of decision was flowing towards her, and she had not decided.

The bouquet had shown that bitter truth could be as illusory as dreams. It was a pledge that Lothar and his world really existed. Following that wonderful realization, the familiar crippled shapes of doubt intruded.

She had to fight them, and also fight to conceal the conflict. So she fought them in the front room which was invisible to Lothar's invisible eyes. By evening she was numb and exhausted.

There was no doubt about her love and need for Lothar. But did Lothar love her for what she was —or only a false image of her?

He'd never been to Earth. He'd seen her only through the untrustworthy Viewer. Yet he told her she was beautiful. So something was wrong somewhere. For she was not beautiful.

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder? Maybe, so long as he believes he's seeing true. But there was no guarantee that Lothar was seeing true. Inescapably, beauty was the sum of perfect proportions. Lothar's body was perfectly proportioned. By those standards she was misshapen and ugly.

Were there other standards? Was disproportion considered beauty in Byre? And, conversely, Lothar considered an ugly man in his own world?

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She just couldn't believe that. It was too easy, too pat. Besides, he had the self-assurance, bearing, and grace of a man who knew he was good to look upon.

So the fault must lie, optically, not in Lothar's eye but in the Viewer. He'd said light was prone to distortion in its passage through hyperspace . . .

The new philosophy ruled that the worst must be faced. Could she face the disappointment in Lothar's eyes when he carried his bride across the threshold of his world—and saw her, plainly and truly, as a hag?

She couldn't. Yet she would be strong, in another way. Tonight she would stay resolutely in this front room, while her heart was breaking, knowing that Lothar would visit her bedroom in vain, knowing that, like Byre itself, he was so very near and yet so very far.

Tomorrow she would put the house up for sale and move out.

Tomorrow, however, was an eternity away, and she was too overwrought to sleep. She tried to settle herself to read the time away. She browsed, only half aware, through a book of classic plays. A large part of her attention was on the door to the bedroom, listening, waiting, wondering, in mute agony . . . She had locked that door, locked herself out from everything she ached for.

Later on, she discovered she was reading, mechanically, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Intermittently, the play would leap above crudity into the realm of purest poetry. One such soaring leap swept her whole being up with it:

Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena.

ALL the pain she was trying to shut out came flooding through.

"Lothar! Lothar!" cried the Helen who was not from Troy. And she broke into wild sobbing.

Almost at once, there were sounds of someone at the bedroom door, fumbling with it, trying to unlock it. But she had the key.

"No, no . . . please, no," she pleaded, mufflingly, covering her face. The tears ran wetly between her fingers.

The door crashed open and splintered wood flew.

A terrible caricature of Lothar stood in the doorway. It was like a reflection in a distorting mirror. He looked hunch-backed, gaunt, vicious. The distortion had given him an ugly beak of a

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nose and twisted his mouth into a sneer.

She lowered her hands and stared at him.

The worst must be faced, and outfaced. And then, sometimes, the miracle of metamorphosis: the worst becomes the best.

"Lothar!"

He advanced into the room, slowly, groping. His hands looked like claws.

"Lamb, where are you? Everything's a blur."

Even his voice was harsh.

She went to meet him, and her heart was full of love. She knew now that where real love was concerned, appearances didn't matter, not even her own. She embraced him. He picked her up and turned back to the bedroom.

"You'll have to guide me to the threshold, Lamb. I've lost my way. Earth confuses me."

It was as if the whole north wall of that cold bedroom had been demolished. Beyond it, the winter landscape was gone. Instead, the flower garden glowed in the golden light of Byre.

Lothar carried her through, and Earth vanished like a burst bubble. He strode easily on until they came to an ornamental pool. He set her down on its lip.

"This," he said, "will be your mirror now."

His voice was rich again and thrilled her. She looked and saw the double reflection. Lothar, as handsome as ever. Herself, a classic Grecian beauty.

"I don't understand," she murmured. "I'm so happy. This must be the heaven we dream of. And Earth was hell."

"Earth can be heaven, too, for the people who belong there. The unfortunates are those born in the borderland and by some freak of attraction are captured by the wrong world. Lost sheep, like you, my dear."

"Are all the sheep as ugly as I was?"

Lothar squeezed her arm. "You were never ugly, girl. No-one is, inherently. It's a relative term. A landed fish looks ugly. In water, it's grace itself. A land animal in water can look monstrous merely through refractive distortion. For the same reason, anyone truly native to Byre is likely to look ill-favored on Earth."

"Then I was dull, Lothar. There was a clue to the truth and I didn't grasp it. When I picked —or, in my mind, picked—that flower for you, I noticed it was perfectly formed. As are all the flowers here. But the ones you sent me arrived all awry."

"Eccentric," he nodded. "But still beautiful, I hope."

"The way I felt then, no tribute could be other than beautiful. Thank you, my love."

She kissed him again, and presently they went to the house.

THE END

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FIRE SALE

By LAURENCE M. JANIFER

The General was smart . . . so was the Commissar . . . so was Lucifer. Question: Who was the smartest?

"LET'S not be silly about this," the Devil said casually. "You don't need any proof, and you don't want any proof."

General Debrett nodded, very slowly. "You're right," he said. "There's an—an aura. A feel. Something new . . ."

"Of course it's new," the Devil said. "You've never seen me before. Not directly." The General thought of an incident in Korea . . . a few incidents . . . but the Devil was going on. "Let's not waste time," he said. "I'm in a hurry, and I'd like to get this settled."

When you looked at him directly, the Devil was not at all good-looking. He was, in fact, rather horrible. The General tried to look away, failed and at last came to the point. "All right," he snapped. "What is this you want to get settled? Why have you come to me, anyhow? I certainly didn't—ah—call you up."

"No," the Devil said, shaking what passed for a head. "But a man named N. V. Basilienko did."

"Basilienko? The man who—"

"The head of the Special Services branch of the Red Army—to put matters in your own terms."

The General almost smiled. "Well, you're certainly a special service," he said. His lips were dry: this, he told himself, would never do. He took one breath, and became very nearly calm. "What did he do, set you on me? Because that won't work, you know. It—"

"He didn't set me onto you," the Devil broke in. "As a matter of fact, he would be very annoyed if he knew I was here."

"Then what the devil—"

"No offense," the Devil said, and grinned. The grin nearly lost General Debrett his hard-won calm. It was an extremely upsetting grin. "It's just that Comrade Basilienko offered me a deal."

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The General closed his eyes. That way, he told himself, he appeared to be thinking, and he didn't have to look at the figure which had appeared in his private, securely locked office to talk to him. "It's no surprise to find you on the side of our Communist friends—"

"Oh, now, you mistake me," the Devil said silkily. "I don't take sides; I don't have to. You human beings do quite enough of that to keep me occupied. No. As I said, Comrade Basilienko would be much irritated if—"

It was surprising how much more composure the General found available with his eyes shut. "Now you're the one who's wasting time," he snapped. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah," the Devil sighed, "the military mind. Efficiency. Forms. Reasons." There seemed the echo of a chuckle. "However—to put matters in a nutshell, my dear General, Comrade Basilienko offered me a little deal. He's given me quite a good bargain for your death."

"For my—" Almost, the General opened his eyes in surprise.

"Exactly," the Devil said with great composure. "He has promised me the burning alive of every inhabitant of the town of Yavr' Chenko. Thirteen hundred people—not a very large town, of course, but then . . . it's not a bad offer, just for one man."

"The . . . burning alive . . ." General Debrett licked his lips, opened his eyes and shut them again. "You mean . . ."

"He will see to it that the townspeople are burned alive, if I see to it that you are made quickly, efficiently and entirely dead." The chuckle came again. "The means, of course, are left to me—and I've had some rather interesting ideas."

"Then you're going to—you're going to kill me? Now? Here?" Panic fluttered in the General's breast.

"Oh, no," the Devil said. "I came here, as a matter of fact, to ask you a question."

"A—question?"

"That's right," the Devil said. "In a nutshell, General: have you got a better offer?"

THERE followed a period of silence.

The General, at last, managed to find a sentence. "A bargain—what sort of bargain?"

The Devil's voice was carelessness itself. "Oh," it said, "you know the sort of thing I like. Or you ought to. By reputation, if no other way. And by the sort of bargain Comrade Basilienko made with me."

A town, the General thought, burned alive . . . screaming and dying . . . "I suppose," he said cautiously, "it's no good appealing to your . . ."

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"To my better nature?" the Devil asked. "I'm afraid not. For one thing, I haven't any, you know."

"Oh. But—well, the sort of offer you want, I—I can't even think of it. It's not possible."

"Then Comrade Basilienko is to have his way?" the Devil asked.

"I—"

"I warn you," the Devil continued, "my ideas are very interesting indeed. Though I doubt you will have the leisure to enjoy them. And then, there is the thought that you will be handing the good Comrade, on a platter, his dearest wish . . ."

Well, the General asked himself sternly, what was the Cold War for? Men sacrified themselves in wartime . . . and he was valuable, he knew that: he had a head on his shoulders, he could think and command and lead . . . well, it wasn't egotism. Basilienco wanted him dead and Basilienko was not famous for acting at random.

He was valuable. Perhaps, in fact, he was worth—oh, thirteen hundred or so ordinary men, untalented for this war.

But to condemn that many to death . . .

To hand them over to the Devil . . .

About his own death General Debrett could be calm enough, after a second or so. Men died: that was that. But to give Basilienko an advantage, to give him (as the Devil had said) his dearest wish . . .

It was, he reflected bitterly, a very nice dilemma. Ends and means again, just as it had been in school—how long ago?

Ends and means . . . the Cold War versus the imminent death of . . .

"Well?" asked the Devil.

General Debrett opened his eyes. "Wait a minute," he said suddenly. "Let's think this out."

"Have you an offer?"

"Listen to me." Even the Devil didn't look quite so bad any more. The General's voice was full of urgency. "Basilienko wants me dead. Why?"

"He is a Russian," the Devil said. "At the moment, that seems to be reason enough. Silly, of course, but—there it is."

"He wants me dead because I'm valuable to the United States," the General said. "Because—as long as I'm around—it isn't quite so easy for him to figure out a plan for easy conquest."

"Well?" The Devil seemed impatient. His—tail, the General supposed—was twitching.

"Well, if you kill me," the General said without any hesitation, "and there is a war, the war will be shorter, and that'll be less to your liking, won't it?"

(*Continued on page 130*)

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Illustrator EMSH

Conclusion

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When the Idols Walked

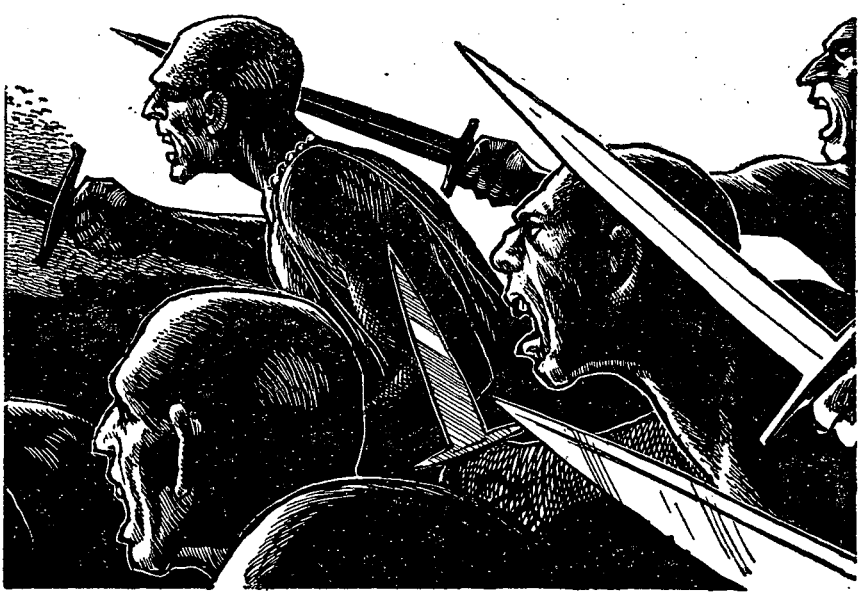
By JOHN JAKES

Synopsis of Part One

Journeying from his homeland in the high steppes to the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward, Brak is captured in a surprise attack on a port beside the Dark Sea. He finds himself chained to the oars of a war galley captained by the admiral of the Gords, fierce, cruel people bent on subjugating their neighbors.

The next target of the Gords is the city-state ruled by Rodar, Prince of the Two Bays. The tiny kingdom is visible to Brak during a rising storm, out of which a lighter vessel sails to attack the Gord war fleet. Aboard is the sorcerer of the conquered people, overtaking the attackers to gain revenge.

The wizard is pitted against Ilona, a beautiful blonde witch of the Gords also aboard the flagship. Each spell-worker conjures up phantom monsters,



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mind-demons that materialize above the water. The Gord sailors panic and the ships founder.

Brak's chains break. He slays the Gord admiral with a sword, though not before his face is fixed in memory by Ilona, who witnesses the duel. Brak jumps overboard. Swimming to shore in the violent sea, he loses consciousness.

Several weeks later, he wakens from a comatose slumber. He is in the house of Phonicios, chief of the Merchant Guild of Rodar's city. Brak was found unconscious on the beach by Phonicios's freedman steward, Calix, and nursed back to health by the merchant's daughter, Saria. Phonicios questions Brak about his presence aboard the Gord ship, and also about Ilona's power. Because the blonde witch may prove a menace during the attack which Rodar's people have felt was imminent, Phonicios takes Brak to the palace. There he will tell his tale to Mustaf ben Medi, the vizier in charge during Prince Rodar's absence. Rodar is currently commanding the army at the frontier.

On the way to the palace, Phonicios points out things of interest in the central square: the temple housing the Sacred Lamb Fleece, a religious-patriotic artifact whose loss would be disastrous; and two gigantic bronze statues, twenty times higher than brawny Brak. One is Ashtir, the city's goddess of fruitfulness. Her image has wheels and can be moved to the fields to bless the harvest. This is done by an ingenious arrangement of internal machinery controlled from a chamber within her carven skull.

But the other god-statue, cyclops-eyed Jaal the Leveller, is the god whom the people fear and propitiate with offerings. Brak notices smaller stone versions of Jaal, tall as a man, on many street corners.

At the palace, the ineffectual vizier Mustaf refuses to grant Brak an audience. Leaving in disgust, the men encounter Phonicios's enemy, a merchant named Huz al Hussayn. Huz was dismissed from the Merchant Guild at Phonicios's insistence, because of sharp practices. Huz baits Phonicios, threatens him until Brak steps in. Suddenly, out of the shadows swirls a phantasm-shape — a strangler with a knotted rope of smoke which Brak feels around his throat.

He drives his sword through the spectre. It vanishes, unharmed. Huz flees, laughing. Grim-faced, Phonicios says he recognized the ghost. It was that of a man called Yem the Strangler. A man dead and buried for

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months. Huz, somehow, has sorcery upon his side.

While explaining more about Huz's enmity, Phonicios conducts Brak to the city burial ground. Yem's corpse recently disappeared from its grave. None knew why, until now. There was a second grave robbery also —the body of a man known only as The Thief-Taker. He was a vicious criminal informer finally murdered by his own comrades. The Thief-Taker had two overwhelming passions a lust to do evil, and a lust for women. Most of the time, his craving for women was stronger. It made him notorious. Phonicios believes that Huz has somehow summoned these shades to help him take vengeance. The fact that another Guild member was recently strangled with a knotted cord now takes on new significance.

At this point, Brak and the older man pass another area of the burial ground. Fiery pits boil in the earth among demon-shaped stone monuments. These are the Sulphur Fields. Underground are the city's official crematoriums. Calix, the steward, was once apprenticed to the priestly cult that maintains the burial fires, but he quit because he was disgusted by the cult's corruption. Apparently the priests are quite willing to cremate senile relatives or unwanted children abandoned near the entrance to their domain. Once borne underground, Phonicios relates, whether living or dead, a victim is never seen again.

That night, puzzling over ways to help his benefactor, Brak is roused by shrill screams. In the courtyard of Phonicios's house stands one of the man-sized stone Jaal idols, walking, moving, somehow magically brought to life.

The idol slaughters several of Phonicios's servants and nearly slays Brak before growing crowds force it to flee. Brak gives chase.

Several blocks away, he comes upon the idol standing in shadow, looking inside a noisy pleasure-house like some incredibly shy, witless child. Brak realizes that the spirit of The Thief-Taker, with its desire for women paramount, is moving the idol. Brak brings a stone balcony crashing down upon the statue, shattering it. But a cloud-like white essence—the evil motivating spirit, Brak guesses—flies up from the rubble unharmed, to vanish.

Next day, after conferring with Brak and agreeing that Huz must be commanding more than one magical demon, Phonicios asks Mustaf for protection. He also requests a search of the city since Huz has disappeared. Mus-

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taf rejects his demands. Prince Rodar has lost a major battle at the border. The army is scattered. An invasion by the Gords impends. Mustaf can spare no men.

Shortly a delegation from the Merchant Guild arrives. The delegation demands Phonicios's resignation. Brak forces the men to admit that Huz has contacted them, frightened them into making their demands. He backs up Phonicios's refusal to quit by drawing his sword. The merchants flee.

An hour later, Calix returns from an errand. Phonicios shows Calix a parchment ostensibly written by the latter. The parchment requests Saria, with whom Calix has long been in love, to meet him. Saria is nowhere in the house. Calix denies having written the parchment. Nor has he seen the girl.

Darkness whirls in the chamber. Yem the Strangler materializes with a message for Phonicios:

Saria is being held prisoner near a certain sarcophagus in the Sulphur Fields. Unless Phonicios sends a single slave there to say that he resigns as Guild chief, she will be killed within one hour's time.

Yem vanishes. Phonicios refuses to let Brak try to rescue the girl. In defiance of Phonicios's wish, Brak sets out alone.

At the Sulphur Fields he comes upon Huz holding Saria captive. Another cowled figure lurks nearby. Huz points to a large sealed jar. The jar, he says, contains the secret of his power —The Thief-Taker's spirit. Brak is hiding in the shadow of a great burial-figure whose stone sword hangs over his head. Suddenly the jar shatters. Huz gapes in astonishment, the stone sword descends. Brak leaps aside, narrowly escaping death.

Yem the strangler materializes. After a fierce struggle, Brak manages to destroy the phantom in one of the fire-pits.

Then the cowled figure reveals itself. It's Ilona, witch of the Gords.

Now Brak understands the source of Huz's power. But does Huz realize that his ally is an enemy of Rodar's people? Brak thinks not.

Ilona remembers Brak well. It was she who sensed him watching in the first place, released The Thief-Taker's essence by cracking the jar. Now she sends the essence darting from statue to statue in the graveyard. After a nightmarish fight with flying imps, gargoyles and all the other idols brought to life, Brak lies stunned. A messenger arrives. Phonicios has already dispatched a message giving his resignation to the Guild. Now he wants Saria returned.

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As the messenger flees, Huz is about to release the girl. Eyes gleaming hatefully, Ilona intervenes. She persuades Huz al Hussayn to change his mind, take his revenge despite Phonicios's accession to his demands. Brak tries to rise, fight, but he is too weak.

Half-conscious, he is dragged to the cave-like entrance to the underground crematorium. Saria slumps down beside him. Huz and Ilona slip away.

Moments later, chanting priests emerge and carry Brak and Saria underground to the crematory vaults from which no person, whether alive or dead, ever returns.

Chapter VII

THE music penetrated Brak's half-conscious mind first.

Eerie voices in a minor key wailed some ritual-song. Enfolded in a darkness of swimming nausea, the big barbarian listened to the skirling chant as it ascended higher, then burst into a frenzied harmony of many voices, then diminished again, each voice sliding down the scales to a low, moaning note that was like the ululations of a soul in its final agonized paroxysm.

The weird cyclic strain was repeated a second, a third time. Brak grew wider awake. The sulphurous reek and the scalding heat on his right leg, side and shoulder drove the dimness from his mind at last. He stiffened, sucked in breath.

He remembered.

He remembered the incredible duel in which the stone creatures of the grave-ground were animated by The Thief-Taker's essence at the command of the Gord witch Ilona.

He remembered being supported by many hands, and being borne downward to—wherever he was now.

Cautiously Brak worked his numb-tingling fingers. He could tell that he lay prone upon something hard, unyielding. His fingers explored close to his sides.

Stone?

An altar?

Perhaps a bier.

Chill panic swept through the dark of his mind as all details came back. The crematorium underground! That was where he was. It accounted for the strange, ever-continuing chant repeated by a score of male voices. It accounted for the heat on his flank, for the bright flame-patterns that danced against his eyelids.

Brak rolled his head to one side, letting out a false moan. For although the wound in his temple still ached, the pain was nothing compared to the sudden, desperate sense of terror which full memory had brought.

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He was conscious of persons passing close by. Head still rolled to the sides, he slitted his eyes open.

Had Brak the barbarian not known otherwise, he might have suspected that his soul had migrated to that Underworld, called by different names in different kingdoms, of which he had heard ever since his youth on the high steppes. Since setting out from those wild lands of the north on his long journey to seek his fortune in the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward, the gigantic warrior had never seen a sight to rival this one for sheer savagery.

He was lying on a raised granite platform. Directly in his line of vision Saria, the auburn-haired daughter of Phonicios, was likewise stretched prone. Beyond her, the floor of a great rock-walled chamber sloped away. The chamber's walls, far distant, were of granite. Underground seepage broke through here and there and trickled down, bluishly phosphorescent.

Between the rock catafalques on which Brak and Saria lay and those distant walls whose bases were pocked with the black maws of the underground crematorium blazed like a cruel thread-of-gold tapestry.

A score of bubbling fire-pools similar to the ones aboveground opened in the rock floor. Flames of scarlet and vermilion, orange and yellow blurred and blended upon the ever-changing surfaces of the pools. Most curiously, Brak saw, the pool in the approximate center of the chamber was twice as wide as the others. From its surface, which was brighter than any of the other fire-wells by half again, little licking red-yellow tongues constantly erupted.

Practically surrounding this largest pool were scores of crude wooden sleds. On each lay a stiffened, linen-wrapped shape Brak surmised to be a corpse.

THERE seemed to be two classes of men busy on the crematorium floor. One was composed of big, generally ugly-faced brutes whose loins were wrapped in linen but who were otherwise naked. They appeared to do the manual labor. Even now, several of them dragged one of the sleds toward the fire-pool. The other group, far outnumbering the first, consisted of relatively more elegant men, all with carefully razored pates whose surfaces gleamed with a coating of oil. These men—priests?—wore gray robes and ornate flashing girdles of beaten gold. Each priest also displayed a blood-red gemstone in his left earlobe.

One priest at the rim of the central fire-pit intoned some words from a parchment. The

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priest, swag-bellied, exchanged amused, cynical looks of boredom with one of his fellows while he read. The other priest swung a censer that belled out green smoke. Amid the clatter of sleds being dragged every which way and the constant hiss and pop of the fire pools, it was impossible for Brak to hear the words being spoken.

On signal from a third priest, two linen-loined slaves, grunting and straining, upended a sled.

The corpse slid into the fire-pool. There was a leap of flame, a curl of smoke. The priest put down his parchment, shrugged, walked over to a huge pyramid of brass jars, selected one. With a stylus he inscribed something upon a clay seal near the lid. Another slave bore the jar away.

The priest returned to his parchment. His companion with the censer was pulling from a goat-skin of wine. The wine dribbled down his gown. A new sled was dragged forward. The ceremony began again.

As Brak watched this ritual, his uneasiness lessened. True, the underground scene was terrifying enough with its reek of death-balms, its stacked corpses, its destroying fire. Yet Brak had the uncanny feeling that he had been dragged into some busy, efficient mercantile establishment. The more he watched, the more he noticed priests chaffering with one another. The handling of the dead of Rodar's city-state was no esoteric mystery. Contrary to rumor, it was a brisk, if tiresome, trade.

Still, Brak could recall some words spoken by Phonicios. The head of the Merchant Guild had said that those who entered the crematorium, whether alive or dead, never returned.

Brak's broadsword had been shattered in the fighting with the stone imps. He felt naked without it. While he was pondering what to do next, there was a stirring from the bier alongside his. Giving a low moan, Saria moved her head from side to side.

As she turned toward Brak, consciousness lit her eyes. Then memory. Then terror.

At once the young girl sat upright, glancing wildly about. She slid off the bier, hesitated. Then she started to run.

Brak had no choice but to leap after her, catching at her wrist.

"Saria!" He caught her wrist, pulled her back. "You'll only get yourself slain, girl, if you run!"

The girl twisted wildly in his grip. "I know where we are! Let me go! I'd rather kill myself in the fire than wait for them to—"

"Ho!" bawled a voice. Brak got hold of both of Saria's wrists, struggled wildly to calm her. "The new arrivals are up! You apprentices, bring your staffs, quickly!"

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THE man who shouted was a priest. He appeared from around a pile of corpse-laden sleds near the spot where Brak was attempting to hold Saria.

More priests converged, together with a group of the apprentices, the unpleasant-looking men in loin-cloths. They carried large thornwood clubs.

The priest who had summoned the others was a round-shouldered, sallow old man. He pointed at Brak.

"This is sacred ground, outlander. Harm will come to you if you defile it with struggle."

"Girl, silence!" Brak hissed angrily at Saria, giving her a violent shake that finally calmed her somewhat. She passed quickly beyond fright or hysteria, staring at him limply and horror-eyed, her mouth open slightly.

Brak's belly knotted up as the apprentices shuffled forward, formed a wary ring, clubs ready. Slowly Brak took his hands away from Saria's shoulders. He glowered at the men ringing him.

The old priest started forward. He surveyed Brak's gigantic body wide-shouldered and naked save for a garment of lion-hide about his hips. Brak's single yellow braid was twisted across his left shoulder, hung down his heaving chest.

"We far outnumber you, outlander," said the priest. "It would be wise for you to submit."

The big barbarian spat angrily. "We'll submit to release, nothing else. Stand out of our way."

The priest's mouth dropped open, incredulous. "What kind of simple-witted fool have we here?"

"He is not Rodar's kingdom," said one of the apprentices. "Nor of any principality hereabouts, that I can tell. Let us quiet him, lord." The man fingered his club.

Instantly Brak dropped into a half-crouch. His fingers flexed. His mouth was an ugly smile. "Come, bravo!" he growled. "Your club should make you full of courage. If I mean to leave here, it seems I must prove I do. Begin, then!"

The apprentice's eyes, surrounded by thick fatty lids, gleamed in anticipation. The elderly priest, however, raised a warning hand.

"We are under instruction not to provoke him until Lord Nestor has had an opportunity to speak with him. Outlander, calm yourself and—" The old man's eyes flew wide. He scuttled back in alarm. "Name of a name! He's a madman!"

Brak shambled forward. "Stand out of the way."

"I warn you!" piped the priest. "You will only do yourself injury, as well as the maiden if—"

"Stand out of the way!" roared Brak, and lunged.

The apprentice leaped back too, raising his thornwood club. But

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not in time. Brak's big hands closed around the man's wrist.

The apprentice cursed. Brak wrenched the club loose from the bully's hand, hearing finger-bones pop. The apprentice shrieked, spewed filthy curses. Brak whirled the club around his head, slammed it against the man's skull.

With a cry, the man toppled. All around, Brak heard the rush of feet. Saria was pushed aside. Other apprentices darted in.

Brak met one of their clubs in mid-air. He parried it with his own, hacked it aside. From behind him another club landed a stout blow. Brak felt his knees buckle.

He struggled to stay upright. He whirled the club again, cutting a wide arc that sent the priests dancing backward, crying out in alarm. But the apprentices still pressed in steadily.

WITHIN moments Brak realized his fight was hopeless. Yet he refused to quit. He beat at a naked arm, struck it violently with the club, saw the apprentice drop, slobbering in pain. The bone of the man's upper arm was pulped by Brak's mighty blow, and the skin of that arm was like a bag containing nothing but jelly.

Another club whizzed against Brak's temple, stunning him. Then another. He cursed.

Two more blows brought shattering pain to his forearms. His own club fell from his limp fingers. Just in front of him, still one more apprentice stepped up, club high above his head, ready to deliver a strike that would knock Brak's brains out.

At that instant, a new voice rose sharply:

"Did I not command you to touch neither of them? Withdraw! And bring them to the blue chamber!"

The new arrival was a plump, cherry-cheeked priest whose ornamented girdle seemed more splendid than those of his companions. The priest wheeled, marched away toward one of the blackish openings in the far wall. Several of the apprentices grumbled among themselves, but obeyed instantly, closing around Brak.

The big barbarian could barely stand, so hard had he been hammered with the clubs. The floor of the chamber tilted one way, then another as he was hustled across it.

Other apprentices rushed Saria along behind. Soon they entered the black maw in the wall, turned once, following the bend of a short tunnel cut from solid rock. They emerged into a small, low-ceilinged cavern where a series of guttering lamps, each with a bluish flame, burned in niches. In other niches Brak noticed several small replicas of the god Jaal the

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Leveller, and of the fertility goddess Ashtir.

The plump priest awaited them, hands folded over his small belly. Brak's senses were clearing. With a curse he threw off his captor's hands.

As soon as the others withdrew, the plump priest smiled. It was a ghastly thing to see, because it was so unctious. The blue lamp-flames shone on the priest's cheeks and pate as he made a gesture of apology to Brak and Saria. The girl was leaning against Brak's chest, shadow-eyed with fear.

"Permit me to offer excuses for my underlings," said the priest. "I gave them specific orders that they were not to injure you, so that we might have an opportunity to exchange words." The man spoke with a sweet, silvery richness now. Yet Brak distrusted the fox-glitter of his shrewd little eyes. The man made a slight bow. "I am Nestor, chief priest of the crematorium. When you were brought here—"

"Kidnapped, might be closer to it," Brak growled. "If this be your domain, then order your people to free us. The girl is the daughter of Phonicios, who is head of the —"

"Spare me!" said Nestor with sarcasm. "Of course I realize who she is. Even here, far underground, I have ways of remaining conversant with the persons of prominence in Prince Rodar's city. I have even heard of you, outlander. There has been much talk lately of the barbarian from the north. The man who wears lion-skin. The man who has attached himself to Phonicios's household. Well, please set your fears at rest. It is most regrettable that you find yourselves in our caves of sanctification. Obviously you are not in need of our—ah—rather special services."

"We were left near to unconsciousness at the entrance to this place," Brak explained. "We were attacked by enemies who wanted to dispose of us."

"Of course, of course," said Nestor sympathetically. "It's plain there must be a sensible reason behind this regrettable mistake. We shall remedy the error immediately. That is why I summoned you here, don't you see?"

Against Brak's huge torso, Saria stirred. A trace of hope shone in her frightened eyes all at once.

"Then—" she said softly, "you mean to free us?"

Nestor said simply, "Why, yes." And smiled benignly.

ELATION soared through Brak the barbarian. He hugged Saria close, a great breath of relief whistling out between his lips. Only dimly did he hear Nestor continuing to speak. The words

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sunk in a few at a time, as the chief priest walked briskly about the small chamber, rubbing his hands together:

"—will go free as soon as we conclude certain arrangements. Lord Phonicios is widely known to be a wealthy man." Nestor stopped, looked back at them over his shoulder. Behind his eyes, the greedy fox watched. "Shall we say a payment of fifty thousand dinshas for both of you?"

Outrage replaced Brak's elation of a moment ago. "Is that what you intend? *Ransom?*"

"Since you speak the word in such a blunt, ugly way, yes," Nestor snapped, "ransom. Accompanied, naturally, by other conditions. Once the sums are secured from Phonicios, you will both be escorted to the border. You will not be allowed to return to Prince Rodar's domain during the rest of your lives, on pain of death." Again Nestor turned wheedling: "Understand my position. I am offering you your lives. In return, you must agree to my terms. There is a superstition abroad that those who enter the crematorium never return, whether alive or dead. The continuing prosperity of our cult depends upon maintaining that illusion. But we are speaking frankly here. You will be alive. We ask only that you vanish—as though you had truly been received by our holy fire."

"In other words," Brak said low, "you are telling us that we must pay to go free, in order that we may then hide for the rest of our lives as though we were dead?"

Now the masks were off. Nestor's tone grew curt:

"Precisely."

"Never to see my father again?" Saria said numbly. "Nor my—my dear Calix?"

"Isn't your life better than nothing, you simple child?" Nestor spat.

"This is no holy place," Brak snarled. "This is a nest of thieves."

Nestor's shrug was eloquent. "I won't deny that our cult turns a handsome profit by freeing—ah—mistaken victims in just such a manner as I proposed to you. Nor will I argue the ethics of the procedure. Thieves we may be. But highly sophisticated ones, you must admit. For we know the advantage is all ours. Either you agree to help me work out details of obtaining the fee, perhaps in the guise of the traditional burial offering, to be paid by Phonicios, or you'll both feed the flames."

"No," Brak said. "You'll feed it first, you bloated leech—"

"Stay back!" Nestor exclaimed, retreating. "Cause trouble and this time I'll deal with you the way you deserve, you loutish—"

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HIS words became a high-pitched screech of terror as Brak crossed the blue-lit chamber in two strides, fastened his angry hands around Nestor's windpipe.

No reason was left in the big barbarian now, only an all-consuming urge to do murder.

He bent Nestor backward, watching the man's cheeks purple as he plucked feebly at Brak's hands. Red anger-mist clouded Brak's mind. He grunted, grunted again, choking. Somewhere, Saria cried out.

A thunderbolt of pain broke against Brak's skull. His hands slipped. He went to one knee.

Twisting, he looked to the left. Apprentices were streaming in through the rock tunnel, summoned by Nestor's outcry. Brak let go of the chief priest, came erect, spun and caught the next down-swing of a club in mid-air.

The blow nearly broke his palms, but he managed to hold onto the club, wrench it away as more men rushed in, bare feet thudding.

"Do not spare him this time!" Nestor howled. "He has lain hands on me—dishonored me—*bludgeon him!*"

Hoping that Saria had taken the opportunity to flee, Brak swung the club he had wrenched away from his attacker. The thickest end collided with the cheek of an apprentice, tore it open. The man shrieked and pitched over with blood cascading down his side.

Brak took blow after blow, matching each with ones of his own. An apprentice's skull cracked. Another bully fell twitching with his backbone broken in half by a terrific thud of the club. But the numbers of them overwhelmed Brak at last.

Fogginess swirled in his mind. Nestor exhorted his men to be merciless. They were.

Bodies pressed close. Clubs rained down. Brak dropped his weapon, shook his head from side to side, muttering:

"I must stand. I must not—"

Like a felled tree, he tumbled.

They carried him from the blue chamber, driving kicks and blows against his body. Suddenly there was a commotion, another outcry.

Saria—screaming.

She had not escaped, then. Despair claimed Brak completely.

He saw the cause of the girl's wailing. A new victim covered with blood—a man either dead or mortally wounded—was being dragged from a tunnel-mouth on one of the crematorium sleds. Even at a great distance, the man's thatch of red hair was clearly recognizable.

The third victim for Nestor's cult was Phonicios's steward, Calix.

The apprentices closed more tightly around the staggering

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Brak, hustling him along over the floor of the crematorium.

To what, exactly, Brak could not tell. Dazed and defeated, he knew one thing, however—

Whatever happened, at the end, there would be death waiting.

Chapter VIII

FOR a period of time Brak's brain darkened totally.

He did not recall being cast into the unlit chamber in which he awakened. He was slumped in a corner, upon straw that smelled of decayed things. The only light penetrating the chamber came through a square doorway which opened onto the crematorium floor. There, activities were proceeding normally. But three apprentices, arms folded and broad backs facing the chamber, stood guard. They were armed with broadswords now, not clubs.

Hearing a light moan, Brak turned his head.

A ghastly white eyeball glistened moistly in the dark of the room's far side. Brak swallowed to control nausea rising sour in his throat. The eyeball, large as an ivory knob, stared at him in a fixed way.

Brak rose to a standing position, being careful not to make too much noise. He walked a pace, two.

The eyeball was that of a corpse lying on a crematorium sled. The corpse's head was twisted to the side. In this grotesque position, it seemed to watch. Other sleds bearing similar grisly burdens ringed the walls.

The big barbarian's eyes accustomed gradually to the gloom. He located the source of the prolonged moaning. It was Saria, on her knees beside the sprawled, limp body of Calix the steward.

Though no wounds were visible on the Circassian's arms or legs, he lay completely still. With hands pressed to her cheeks, Saria rocked back and forth. Once she reached out to touch the curly red air of the man she had loved.

Brak was standing above her now. The girl paid no attention. Back and forth she rocked. Brak felt a deep, stabbing pity. That she should lose track of events around her was no wonder, considering the horror into which they had been thrust.

Brak wondered why they had not already been consigned to the flames of the biggest fire-pool. He could only assume the reasons were two: First, the crematorium was busy, to judge from the number of corpse-laden sleds stacked here and outside. Second, no doubt Nestor wished to let the captives gnaw on their own fears awhile, so that their cremation might provide the inmates of the cavern-cult with suitable sport.

Now Brak's mind was fully cleared. Inside this hewn cham-

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ber, the air was less stuffy and fume-laden than in the great vault. Here there was only a moldering smell, as of moist earth. Trying to think of appropriate words to jar Saria out of her grief, Brak knelt down. He put his brawny arm around her shoulder. He was not accustomed to refined or soothing speech. He hesitated. Saria did not respond to his touch. It was as though he embraced one of the idols of Jaal.

"Saria? Girl? You must listen. We must try to escape this place."

Saria turned her head. Her gentle eyes were pain-haunted. "What is the use? Calix is dead."

"He probably died in an attempt to save us," Brak returned. "We can't let his death amount to nothing. If he was the sort of man I think he was, he would have wished us to—"

Brak stopped. Unless he was mad, he had seen Calix's chest rise.

Carefully he withdrew his arm from around Saria's shoulder. She took it as a sign of Brak's own despair, again covered her eyes. Sucking in breath, Brak bent over. He placed his cheek quite close to Calix's face.

A warm gush of air whispered against his skin. Brak went rigid as a voice breathed:

"Cover Saria's mouth, barbarian. I'm alive, right enough. But I must get up quickly. Don't let her scream."

SQUATTING on his haunches, Brak lifted both hands. His left hand darted to Saria's lips, his right to the back of her auburn-haired head. He used the double pressure to keep her silent as her eyes flew wide.

Saria twisted, scratched at Brak's wrists in mad terror. Like a corpse imbued with life, Calix sat up in a single motion. His blue eyes burned as he threw a cautioning finger to his lips. The tableau held a moment longer.

Then Saria's terror abated. Understanding flooded her gaze. Brak released her.

Quickly Calix leaned forward, pressed her hand. "I don't know whether we can get out of this place, Saria," he said, his voice barely audible. "If we can—well, that is why I came."

"Speak softly!" Brak urged. Then, to Saria: "My hand is rough. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"It doesn't matter," said the girl. "So long as Calix is alive." Her joy at seeing him almost overcame her. She pressed his arm. Then her face fell. "Even so, my darling, we're only three. You and Brak are brave men. But against so many, what can be done?"

"Time's in our favor, anyway," said Calix. "We're still alive, are we not? And you forget my occupation before I entered your father's household. I was one of those very bravos you see stand-

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ing outside the doorway. An apprentice in the priesthood."

Brak's eyes flared wide. He recalled Phonicios telling him. "Then you know of ways out of here?"

"The road aboveground is futile," Calix said. "Too heavily guarded. But there is another." He threw Saria and the barbarian long, searching looks. "Provided we have the courage to take it. To do so will require strong hearts—and stronger minds. Minds to deal with the unreal."

Brak made a sharp gesture. "We'll do anything, steward. First, though, tell us how you came here."

Calix gave a nervous shrug which belied his uneasiness. "Soon after lord Phonicios received the ultimatum from Huz, it became apparent—to me, in any case—that you, Brak, had defied his instructions. What would come of your action except possibly death for Saria, I did not know. So I intended to take action myself. I kept your disappearance quiet, and set out for the Sulphur Fields. All I found was incredible wreckage. Monuments overturned, as though demons had been unleashed."

"They were." Rapidly Brak told his story.

CALIX listened, nodded, pointed. "That gouge in your forehead—the one clotting over. It must have leaked while Huz carried you to the crematorium cave-mouth. You say he did it with the Gord witch encouraging him? Then that's double reason for gaining our freedom. I expect the merchant Huz had no notion of whom the woman really serves."

"That thought occurred to me," Brak agreed. "He probably thinks Ilona an itinerant sorceress. Certainly it would be to the advantage of the Gords for her to keep her origins secret. But that's getting ahead of things. Finish your story. You followed the blood-trail to the cave—"

"—and saw it continue underground," Calix went on. "My intent was to follow you down here. The next round of priests soon came to the surface to look for victims. I hid in a large crevice near the cave-mouth and seized one of the priests from behind. I throttled him until he admitted that indeed there were two new prisoners below—a girl, and an outlander with a long braid and lion-pelt. And both alive. I knocked out the first priest while the others prowled the vicinity, searching for fresh corpses. Then I took my dagger, cut myself lightly and smeared the blood on my clothes. I pretended to stagger to the cave as though in death agonies." Calix's mouth formed a sneer. "The priests are not overly scrupulous, as you have learned. They do not stop to

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question a potential candidate about his true state. They prefer to accept him at face value—as a source of dishonest revenue. The practice sickened me when I was 'prenticed here. That's why I never took the final orders."

"This escape route you spoke about," Saria said. "Is it a hidden one?"

"Just the opposite," Calix answered. He pointed past the armed apprentices on guard. "It lies yonder. The pools of fire in the crematorium floor are the routes of escape."

The big barbarian's face screwed into a scowl. "Has your adventure unhinged your mind, Circassian?"

The curly-red head bobbed no. "Most of what you see out there —those reddish pools boiling up out of nowhere—are trumpery. Far back in these caverns, a battery of ancient wizards sit conjuring them. The wizards are never seen. But the fire-pools are their illusions, mind-effects designed to heighten the aura of mystery hanging over the cult."

"And the pools on the surface, in the grave-ground?" asked Brak.

"Oh, those are real enough. But not these. New apprentices, you see, are not let in on the secret until just prior to final ordination. By then, their greed so grips them, they no longer care."

Puzzled, Saria asked, "How can this be a crematorium if the fires are false?"

"The fire from those pools neither feels, looks, sounds nor smells false," Brak added.

"All part of the skillful mind-witchery," Calix whispered. "As to the crematorium part—one of the pools is genuine, and only one. The large one, in the center. You can discern, if you look sharp, that it's not only larger, but considerably brighter, and of a distinctly different hue than the others. Ah, Brak. From your expression, I see you noticed it."

"I did. When I first wakened. The great pool is real—?"

"—and the rest are phantasms," Calix said vigorously. "Projected thoughts of those hidden wizards I mentioned. Every pool except the great central one is in reality a hollow pit opening onto a sunken river. The river runs far below these caverns. Where it winds, no one knows. Some say it flows to the outside. None among the priests has travelled it. Still, if we were to push one of the crematorium sleds through the false fire, then leap down into the river, at least we would be no worse off than we are here. A river must run somewhere!"

"True," Brak admitted.

"But," Calix said with upraised finger, "That is why I spoke before about minds strong enough to ward off illusion. Knowing the

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secret, I am not even sure I can jump through that false fire. As for you and Saria—that is for you to decide."

"Plunge into a lake of flame?" The girl shuddered. "Calix, I do not know whether I can."

"Let the barbarian carry you, then. Brak? Have you the nerve? I think you do."

"I won't pretend the prospect pleases me," Brak growled. "But I think I can manage."

"Believe me—" Calix grew intense. "—there is no other way. The upper approaches are too heavily guarded. The river may lead nowhere. But what have we to lose for trying?"

"How can we be certain there *is* a river?" Brak asked. "Maybe it's another priestly trick."

"You can hear it," Calix replied. "Stand near a false pool and listen sharp. It roars below."

PEERING out of the chamber past the stolidly-planted apprentices whose new broadswords glinted with a deadly luster, Brak surveyed the numerous bubbling, popping fire-pools from which rose tendrils of smoke. The hackles on his neck crawled.

He could not convince himself the fire was false; that it would not scorch and blacken his flesh.

A shuffling of feet, a rasp of voices sounded outside the chamber. Calix wrenched over on his side, white-faced.

"Time's run out! I must play the unconscious man again. Brak —" Calix's hand bit into the barbarian's brawny forearm. "Give the signal. Take Saria and jump through. Remember, it is a mind-trick, nothing more. We have no other chance." Calix's fingers dug deeper. *"No other chance!"*

The shining pates of Nestor and several other priests appeared outside the room. Calix flopped onto his spine, eyes closed. Brak glanced quickly at Saria. Her terror had returned. Her mouth trembled, her eyes darting wildly. A chilly sweat ran on the big barbarian's body as he rose to face the entering men.

He kept glancing beyond the guards, to those smoldering orange pools. They were *real.*

The fire would sear, roast them all to gristle and marrow. Perhaps Calix had been put under a spell by the priests, forced to say what he did—

Terror after terror piled up in Brak's mind. With a mighty effort of will he thrust them all aside. The flames of the central pool would be the trio's destination if they did not choose the other alternative, with all its risks and uncertainties.

Gems glittered on Nestor's hand as the chief priest thrust a torch ahead of him into the room. A sly smile played on his lips. He was careful not to advance too close to Brak as he said:

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"We are prepared for you now, my dear guests. I regret that you refuse to be reasonable and submit to my suggestions for ransom."

The torch-fire guttered and streamed as Nestor dipped the pitchy brand at Calix. "Our departed, unlamented brother there—once he was one of ours, you know—may have had some notion of helping to save you. Whatever his plans, they've come to nothing. We'll consign him to the fire-pool also. Apprentices! Fetch them!"

Saria bit down on her lower lip, arms rigid at her sides. Two of the big-thewed men in loincloths marched her forward. Brak went next, head down, glaring but apparently docile. A third pair of apprentices hefted Calix and bore him along.

Several priests up in front began to chant. Down near the lip of the central fire-pool, other members of the order waited with parchments, censers and three empty sleds. Brak peered through half-slitted eyes as the grim group marched down the slopping stone floor on which funeral liquids ran in stinking, snake-like little rivers.

Between stacked piles of dead the prisoners were led. That they were going to the central pool lent some credence to Calix's tale.

Slightly ahead and to the left, one of the supposedly false pools opened in the stone flooring. *That is false fire!* Brak repeated to himself. *That is false fire which does not burn!*

AS the procession passed the pool, the chanting rose toward the top of the cavern. Around the cave's rim, dozens of priests and hundreds of apprentices watched impassively from among the racks of the dead. Brak struggled to sort out sounds. Gongs beat, voices sang in the minor-key liturgy.

Brak pretended to stumble.

"Stand up, water-legs!" the apprentice on his right sneered, jerking Brak's arm viciously.

The big barbarian had managed to step a few paces closer to the false pool. *That is not real fire,* he thought. *That fire does not burn!*

Yet on his naked calf he felt heat.

The fire was searing him—

He strained his mind until it ached:

That is false fire!

For one instant he imagined—or did it actually happen?—that there was no heat at all upon his skin. And, somewhere, dark river torrents roared loudly enough for him to hear.

Still, Brak was not convinced.

But he had to act anyway.

Just as the procession rounded the curve of the false pool on the approach to the great central

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fire-lake, Brak gave a savage backward jerk on both his arms.

"I will not die!" he wailed, falling to his knees. "I cannot die! I'm afraid to die!"

He shrieked out the words, striking at the ground with his fists. At the head of the procession, Nestor whirled, stalked back.

"Look at him," the priest cried. "Puling like a child. Terrified of death." Nestor seized Brak's hair. "Well, my outlander friend, you'll have to face up to it like the man you pretended to be when you confronted me alone."

Mewing, foam-lipped, Brak shook his head from side to side. He writhed in Nestor's grip. The priest's cherry-colored cheeks ran with rivulets of perspiration as he peered into Brak's face, his amusement changing to irritation. He gave Brak's hair a yank.

"On your feet, barbarian! Don't show this lovely young lady what a coward you are by—"

Nestor's eyes formed huge circles. He raised his hands. Too late. Brak's madness was gone. His eyes were clear. His right hand held the broadsword he had jerked from the grasp of an astonished apprentice.

Like a white steel flash, the broadsword flickered in the air. Nestor's tongue protruded. His eyes bulged. Total agony burned in his gaze as the broadsword-tip slashed through his throat front to back.

Pandemonium broke loose.

THE apprentices charged in, hacking so ferociously that they cut one another in their haste to strike Brak. Through the press, Brak saw Calix tumble out of his captors' grip, snatch a sword and gut one priest, then another.

"The pool!" Calix yelled. "Cut your way to the pool!"

Hell's own work to do that, thought Brak, hewing back and forth, back and forth with the blade. Fighting in such close quarters was difficult. He reached out with his left hand to seize Saria's wrist. He dragged her toward the lip of the false pool while attempting to carve a path with his right arm.

A priest rushed him with dagger drawn. Brak ducked, bowled against the priest's belly with his shoulder. The man spilled over. Brak disembowled him with one quick stroke.

He leaped over the corpse, pulling Saria after. The edge of the pool was near.

On the left, Calix stood straining with one of the heavy crematorium sleds, dragging it forward. Calix gave the sled a kick. It slipped into the fire and vanished.

Brak felt heat on his legs, his naked chest. He thrust Saria be-

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hind him, half-spun to parry the charge of two more apprentices. One slipped in the blood of the gored priest. Brak cut his throat open.

Then he hurled his sword up again, locked hafts with the other apprentice. With a thrust that hurt his muscles, Brak flung the man away.

"Leap!" Calix was shouting. "Brak! Leap through the fire! It is not real!"

Ducking again, Brak brought his shoulder up beneath Saria's body so that she was slung over his forearm like a meal-sack. Then he spun again, stepped toward the pool edge—

He stopped.

Time suspended itself.

Brak stood gaping at the fire.

Its heat seared his chest, scorched his naked thighs. Tendrils of flame darted up from the surface, dancing, twisting—

That is not real fire! he thought savagely.

His mind hurt, throbbing.

It will not burn! You must leap into it!

Behind him, he heard voices, footsteps, men charging.

An instant became eternity as he remained frozen, incapable of movement, poised above the fire that burned with a bright hell-glare.

Over his shoulder Brak glimpsed the phalanx of priests with daggers, plus apprentices with swords. They closed in cautiously, shuffling like wolves ringing prey.

Again Brak looked to Calix. His mind was an agony of indecision, terror. Reason could not conquer primitive fear old as time.

Two apprentices had nearly reached Calix now. With a last despairing look the Circassian steward leaped high and went plunging downward into the flame.

Brak saw the curly red head disappear as the fire whorled and shifted. The ring of apprentices and priests was but a pace or two away.

Leap! Brak's mind screamed. *False fire! Somewhere down there Calix is—*

Timeless fear won out, screaming back:

Calix is dead—dead and burning!

From a far, echoing place came a weak but discernible splash.

One of the apprentices hauled his broadsword back to run Brak through the middle. The sword glittered, flashed forward.

Carrying Saria, Brak leaped.

BLINDING light beat against his eyes for one infinitesimal particle of time. Then there was nothing except cold, rushing emptiness as he dropped.

There was a roar that grew louder by the moment. With

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smashing velocity, Brak struck the black river.

Down and down he plummeted, stone-heavy. Saria was torn from his grasp.

The water revived him, chilled him awake. Pawing and paddling, he shot to the surface. The current was swift. It spun him round and round. Nothing could be seen in the total blackness.

"Brak?"

That was Calix, crying somewhere nearby.

"Brak, I have Saria on the sled. Where are you? Call out. If the current carries us past you, we can't catch you again."

"Here!" Brak bawled. The echo sang back, *here-here-here.*

"Your voice is closer!" Calix called out. "Reach out! Hold both arms wide. Try to strike the sled."

Above the churning noise of the river, Calix's shouting grew steadily louder. Suddenly it sounded very close at hand. Something hit the outstretched fingers of Brak's left hand. He closed them, felt them slip off splintery wood, shouted with alarm.

He threw himself bodily through the water. The sled, spinning in the current, whacked against his temple. Brak groaned, but managed to fasten both hands on the edge.

At once Calix caught hold of him. Several moments Brak hung on the speeding sled, dazed, until he had strength enough to pull himself up. He sank down, sodden but alive, on the surface of the wooden craft.

"I—lost my sword—" he panted.

Calix managed a weak laugh. "But I held onto mine. And we're free of them."

"Free in an inky pit," Brak panted. "Where are we heading?"

"I told you, I do not know," Calix said, chafing Saria's wrists. "But already I can see a little. After the bright firelight, it will take a moment."

Presently Brak's eyesight adjusted too. High rocky walls rushed by. Outcrops churned the surface of the underground river to foam. Just as Brak was beginning to think that they might be saved after all, they heard a loud, peculiar flapping in the darkness ahead. This was followed by a wild, loon-like cry.

"Some purblind underground bird that—*gods!*" Calix retched.

On his knees on the careening raft, Brak goggled.

Flapping at them over the water like some apparition from the dawn of time came a gigantic leathery-winged bird-creature. The thing had three beaks, one for each of three heads rising on stalks from a single long, scabrous neck.

The creature's wings beat on the underground air. In its three scaly heads, pairs of scarlet eyes

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burned bright as it dipped and came sailing over the river's surface to attack the sled carrying the fugitives.

Chapter IX

CLOSER the great-winged creature flapped, closer—

It skated and skimmed the air just above the churning surface of the river. "The sword!" Brak yelled above the river's tumult. "Calix—the sword!"

Spray stung him, beat around his legs as he struggled to stand. He braced his naked feet on the tipping, tilting surface of the crematorium sled. The wings of the hydra headed thing seemed to flap up and down almost lazily, but this was a trick of the eye, for it was flying at tremendous speed.

The main stalk of the bird-creature's neck divided into three smaller stalks. At the ends of each, pod-like heads swayed, containing those immense scarlet eyes. The three heads came closer together, then shot forward as one when the hydra-bird neared the sled.

White-cheeked, Calix clutched Saria against him. Brak balanced precariously on the uneven surface, poised his sword. The huge bird was almost upon them.

All three of its beaks were open revealing a sticky-scarlet maw in each head. The beaks looked cruelly sharp. They clicked steadily and noisily. The bird swept lower—

Brak lopped at the left head, felt the broadsword sever leathery flesh.

The head dropped into the racing water. Brak's lips peeled back in a humorless wolf-smile while the bird shot on. He screwed his head around, watched the bird wheel. He shouted above the water's noise:

"That stroke may be enough to drive it away—"

Words caught in his throat. The hydra-bird, flapping a trifle erratically a moment ago, had wheeled again, was skimming back along the high-vaulted underground channel. And at the end of the severed, ichor-dripping neck stalk, a sickly pink bud-like thing swelled—swelled—*and budded suddenly into a new, full-grown head with clicking beak.*

A sickened sob shook Brak's chest as he braced himself again. How long could he stand against a creature that could re-create parts of itself from its own gore?

Louder the wings beat, louder than the river's rushing. The air darkened above Brak as the hydra-bird dipped again. Its reddish lantern eyes searched for the puny human thing that had struck it the first time. Maddened, Brak ripped the air with the broadsword.

This time the blade cleft through one of the necks, then

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another. The third head shot down and as the bird winged by, its beak clicked savagely on Brak's forearm, tearing out a gobbet of flesh.

On the surface of the sled, one of the bird's fallen heads twitched. The beak was still clicking frantically, but the reddish glow was dying out of the now-milky eyes.

Brak's shoulders and torso were sticky with the foul-smelling ichor that had sprayed from the severed necks. Necks which, even as he watched, budded and put forth new beaked heads as the hydra-bird completed its next turn.

"The sled is racing too fast," Brak yelled to Calix. "All this pitching—I can't strike properly."

"What good will it do?" Calix shouted back. "The thing is unkillable!"

"Is the current growing swifter?" Brak bawled. Calix gave a frightened nod.

Brak's thews ached from the strain of standing spraddle-legged on the treacherous sled surface. Once more the hydra-bird was drawing close. Its immense wings spread across the entire width of the broad underground river. They made the air churn with their motion. Brak crouched down as the winged juggernaut sped over him, suddenly going into a sharp turn, its wings flapping more loudly than ever.

One of the beaked heads darted at Brak. He hacked at it. The sled pitched dangerously. The blow missed. The beaked head shot on past Brak, questing for Saria huddled against Calix.

BRAK leaped forward, wrapped his elbow around the sinuous neck. Another beak pecked at his spine. Brak concentrated on the thing writhing in his grasp.

The head swung around until Brak's face was no more than a hand's width from the swollen red eyes. Each eye was nearly half as high as Brak himself. A rotting smell spewed out of the thing's maw as it opened its beak to devour Brak's shoulder.

The barbarian wrenched his arm back far as it would go, then rammed it forward. Shining steel slid down the bird's throat. Brak twisted the blade wildly. It emerged from the soft head wall. Brak jerked back. The blade sliced the head open along one side.

Ichor rained on him, mingling with the spume thrown up over the edge of the sled. The cavern walls shot by in a continuous blur. Brak ducked out from under the beak of the second head darting at him from behind. He pinned the first neck to the surface of the sled with his free hand, used his sword to deliver a

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short, chopping blow that severed the head completely.

With another of its eerie, loon-like wails, the hydra-bird flapped into retreat.

Brak rubbed at his wound. He was a ghastly sight as he tottered on the sled, slimed with a mixture of blood, ichor and spray. The creature's polyp-head was budding again as the bird rose up to the ceiling of the cavern. It hung suspended there a moment, its wings beating, beating steadily.

"Keep the girl's face down," Brak shouted as the sled pitched along, clearly out of control. "The thing means to make another attack—"

Just as he spoke, the bird uncoiled itself from the cavern roof and arrowed down at the fugitives.

All three heads projected far out, and were held close together. Brak would have a difficult time getting around the massed heads to strike at the three necks. He watched the eyes loom larger, larger—

He braced himself for the onslaught by clamping both hands on his sword hilt. Faster the hydra-bird dropped, faster—

It levelled out when it neared the water. All three heads were pressed tightly together now. All three beaks clicked in unison. Brak hauled his broadsword back over his head, started the downswing, and felt the sled pitch violently under him.

His sword sliced empty air. His feet slipped from beneath him. With a cry he landed on his back atop Calix and Saria. He clutched his sword helplessly as the bird-heads drove at them, separating slightly, one darting after Calix, another after the girl, the third after Brak.

The sharp beak closed over Brak's thigh, bit deep. Shrieking a savage cry of agony, Brak rammed his blade up and over, into the creature's left eyesocket. There was a sudden scarlet flare within the eye. But the beak did not release. It bit deeper. Calix cursed and battered at the head attacking him. Saria moaned—

A mighty crash wiped out every other sensation.

Brak was pitched this way, that. The sled threatened to overturn. The loon-like wail rose up to a chilling peak, accompanied by a thrashing of wings. Brak was barely able to grip the sword-hilt hard enough to pull it free of the gutted eye. Water cascaded over him, choking him. Abruptly, there was a peculiar silence.

The tenor of the water's rush dropped, became more even. On his cheeks, which stung from the touch of the droplets of ichor, Brak felt a rush of air that was somehow different. Cooler, and sweeter.

Tiny lights flared high over-

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head. Brak peered at them as the sled's speed slackened. Calix was on his knees, looking backward the way they had come. What they saw was a sheer rock cliff with a small, dark opening down near the water's surface.

From this opening, the river gushed into the open air.

LOST but a moment ago, Brak found it within himself to laugh weakly. He laid the broadsword down between his knees as the speed of the sled decreased even more.

"That crash we heard," he panted. "The winged monster struck the cavern wall, while we shot on through the small opening. That is all that saved us, Calix."

"But saved we are," the Circassian practically crowed. He was half-crying, half-laughing. "If it hadn't been for you, Brak, holding off the creature so long, we wouldn't be alive at all."

"I couldn't have done it much more," Brak gasped. "But we've finished with it. It can go back to the dark place where it nests. You were right, Calix, about the river emerging aboveground. But where are we?"

Tenderly Calix bent over Saria. He rubbed her hands until she came out of the shocked state into which fright had driven her. Brak slapped a strand of hair back from his forehead. He found it difficult to control his trembling, and he breathed in great sucking gulps.

The sled slowed still further.

Up ahead, the river turned. But it was impossible to discover their whereabouts, for the stream was flanked on both sides by banks twice as tall as Brak. A few diamond-white stars had emerged. There was a ruddy glow just above the lip of the left-hand bank, indicating twilight.

Soon the current twisted the sled in toward shore. Brak grasped an immense half-shrunken root. Presently the sled nudged against the steep bank, no longer troubled by the current. Climbing up, Brak took Saria by the hand.

"Are you all right, girl? Have you strength to walk?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so. With clean air to breathe, things are better," she murmured dully.

Brak nodded. He went clambering ahead up the slope, eager to reach the top. The glare of the red-colored sundown light increased. Cautiously he pulled himself over the rim, parted some faintly clammy reeds, caught his breath.

"Hurry, Calix," he shouted down. "I think we must be outside the city. But for the rest—"

His eyes swept the horizon, trying to pull meaning from the jumble of shapes in movement all

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across the broad plain. In a moment, Saria and the steward were beside him.

To their left, great rock ramparts rose up. Behind them rear tall buildings reminiscent of the architecture of Prince Rodar's city. Long lines of men in armor were streaming in from the plain, rushing toward a tall gate in the wall.

Toward the plain's center, fires smoldered. Brak thought he saw a broken chariot wheel revolving. A battle-pennon on a staff fluttered in the smoke. The air was filled with faint cries of pain. Armored corpses lay everywhere.

In a hushed voice Calix said, "Look yonder, Brak. On the ridge. What are those machines?"

Brak swung his head to the right. Again he gasped.

SILHOUETTED on the rise against the ruddy glare of sunset were the black outlines of horse-drawn war chariots, a hundred of them at minimum. From each side of the slow-moving vehicles projected long devices like swords, three of them per side. They revolved, as if attached to the chariot-wheels.

"No machines like that have ever been seen in Rodar's armory," Calix said, standing up. "Everything I see tells me we've come upon a battlefield. A battlefield on which things have gone badly for the Prince's people. Look at the way the lines of men run toward the gates. That spells a retreat. We'd best get ourselves inside the walls too.

So saying, he leaped to his feet. Holding Saria's hand, he began to run across the plain. The prospect of gaining sanctuary lent the girl strength. Brak loped along behind them.

Soon they reached the first of the corpses. Hastily Calix pulled Saria's head down against his shoulder. The warm, rich smell of blood blew on the night wind, mingling with the shouts and the blast of trumpets.

Calix swallowed violently. "Brak, these men were not speared. Neither were they arrowed down."

"They were hacked into pieces of meat." Brak kicked a gory leg aside. His stomach wrenched. "Now I know of what those chariots remind me. More particularly, the strange revolving objects projecting from their wheels."

He swung, staring at the slow black-etched cavalcade which was crawling slowly along the sunset-hued rise.

"Those chariots carry scythes on their wheels."

Calix urged Saria forward again, letting her walk as best she could. To hide from the sight of mutilated corpses and dismembered limbs was practically impossible, so numerous were they. Brak had dwelled long enough

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with Phonicios to recognize the trappings strewn with the dead. Here and there, a shield bearing an image of the goat-god of the Gords glittered in the wan sunset. But for every Gord warrior slain, dozens of Rodar's troops lay butchered.

Within a short time, Brak and his companions reached the main road. The last straggling soldiers were hurrying toward the lamp-lit gates. No one paid the three fugitives the slightest bit of attention. Brak ran ahead until he caught up with a young soldier, fell into step beside him.

"The Gords had the best of this one, eh?" he rumbled.

The soldier turned. He gawked at Brak's towering stature, bloody appearance, shrugged weakly.

"What are men with conventional armor against those sycthe-chariots? The men in the way of the revolving blades never had a chance. We lost fifty to every one of the Gords who fell."

"But surely Prince Rodar will be able to hold the army together."

"Then you didn't hear the news?"

"It seems I didn't. Tell me."

"The couriers say Prince Rodar was killed at the frontier. His army was totally routed late last night by the same scythe-chariots which swept down here at high noon. No one saw Rodar fall, but his standard was found broken and trampled. That spells the end. Besides, now the bufoon Mustaf ben Medi is in command. I fancy you never saw *him* today."

Brak shook his head. The soldier spat.

"Nor did I, or anyone else. He stayed within the walls."

The soldier glanced over his shoulder at the line of scythe-chariots which had come to a standstill on the horizon.

"Well, they've decided to let us alone tonight. No doubt they want us properly fatted when they attack the city tomorrow and kill us all." So saying, he made the sign against evil eye and hurried ahead.

BRAK dropped back to his companions. Rapidly he reported all he had learned, finishing:

As soon as we are within the gates, Calix, we should take the girl to her father's house. Then, I suppose, they will want every able-bodied man to defend the walls. Clearly there'll be a siege."

Limping along and panting with exhaustion, Calix said, "Brak, you could ride out if you wanted. This is not your war."

Thinking of the connection between the fierce Gords and their witch Ilona and Huz al Hussayn, Brak glowered. "It has become my war, Circassian."

Soon they passed beneath the arch of the great gate. An im-

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mense crowd of soldiers and citizenry milled just within, filling a public square from side to side. Tall buildings surrounded the square. Brak and Calix had difficulty pushing through toward a street which would take them to the house of Phonicios.

Final stragglers from the beaten army, most with severe wounds, staggered through the gates, adding to the crowd. Torches blazed and streamed as the last sundown light leaked from the sky. Great wenches creaked. The mighty gates groaned shut.

On pulleys a huge timber as thick as Brak's chest was lowered from high overhead. It settled into upright iron prongs with a tremendous chunking sound. At once, an audible sigh of relief could be heard from the crowd.

Shoving along, Brak said over his shoulder, "The crowd seems ill-disposed to move. What can they be waiting for?"

Saria's pointing hand provided the answer. "Look, both of you. Heralds, on that balcony."

On the far side of the square, six liveried men carrying slender horns of brass had appeared. They raised the horns and blew a long, sustained note.

Immediately, like a ghostly echo from the hills outside the city, came the sound of notes blown on warhorns, in defiant response.

A figure emerged on the balcony. He gestured to the crowd for quiet. There was some cheering and applause, but not much.

"I recognize that pot shape," Calix said between his teeth. "Gods of the blackness! He's put on the crested helmet. That means Prince Rodar is dead."

"Citizens! Citizens, your attention!" cried the man on the balcony, gesturing more violently. Brak folded his brawny arms across his chest. He was pressed on all sides by soldiers and commoners. He felt uneasy. So did the crowd. The soldiers whispered to one another. Fear seemed to gather like a cloud over the square.

"Citizens!" Mustaf brayed from the balcony over the heads of the multitude. "There is no reason to fear the Gords. We suffered loss and desolation on the field today, true—"

"Where were you, pudding-belly?" a voice cried. No one laughed.

Mustaf hitched up his baldric which was weighted with a ceremonial sword whose gem studding even at long distance dazzled the eye. "Let the Gords with their scythe-machines gather on the hills tonight!" he shouted. "Let them blow their war trumpets in derision! They will be defeated when they try to storm us behind these walls. I promise you that much, my people. Now that

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news has reached us of the death of our illustrious Prince, I will take command. I swear before Ashtir and Jaal the Leveller that we shall win."

Another voice cried out, "How? Tell us how! Will we attack the Gords with lofty pronouncements?"

"Stop your yapping tongues and I will tell you how!"

THERE was an hysterical edge in the vizier's voice, Brak thought. Yet perhaps it was only a trick of wind, or the result of voices rebounding between the great buildings fronting the square. Gradually the mutterings died away. A last few whispers were stilled by angry shushes from neighbors. Mustaf ben Medi gripped the balcony rail. Several other splendidly-armored officials had emerged behind him to listen attentively. Mustaf's voice carried all the way to the outer walls:

"The Gords have their scythe-chariots, which are new and frightening machines. But they are not half so frightening as the weapon which I have uncovered within this very city. The weapon which brings the might of the gods themselves to our defense."

The words were enough to start people whispering again. A horse-jawed foot soldier nearby grumbled, "Mustaf signing a pact with the masters of the pit, is he? Give me troops, not magic!"

But others were less cynical. On every hand, Brak heard hushed assurances that Mustaf had somehow supplicated Ashtir or, more probably, Jaal the Leveller, and received omens of a victory.

"What's this weapon of yours vizier?" the cry went up.

"Yes! Tell us!"

"What is the weapon?"

"When will we see it?"

"You will see it when the Gords lay seige to our walls!" Mustaf cried back. "They will flee with their eyes unbelieving and their bowels knotted in terror." Mustaf threw his arms wide. His voice was a scream of supplication: "Believe me! You have nothing to fear! The gods are on our side. The gods will *prove* it so!"

"Prove it so?" the whisper ran. "The gods will prove it so? How? *How?*"

All at once, the crowd's mood changed. Like talismans, words passed from mouth to mouth:

"Have no fear. The gods will prove it so."

Puzzled, the big barbarian suddenly glanced to the balcony again. An officer in royal trappings was leaning forward to speak to Mustaf. Brak stiffened. Even at a great distance, the narrow face with its tied hair and scraggly beard was recognizable.

The man, wearing ceremonial armor and present in the vizier's own party, was Huz al Hussayn.

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Now Brak's suspicion became certainty. If Huz had offered the services of his demon-forces to Mustaf—for what else could account for the vizier's claim of a quasimagical weapon?—then Brak felt positive that neither Huz nor Mustaf knew that the witch who made the spirits obey her was a servant of the Gods. Huz had advanced himself, right enough. But at a price he could not guess—the betrayal of an entire city into the hands of a woman who was the enemy.

No other explanation could account for Huz's presence in the royal party, for Mustaf's confidence, Brak believed. Unknowing, Huz would lead Prince Rodar's people to destruction.

"Calix?" Brak called. "Take the girl to her father! I must speak to the vizier at once."

Before Calix could reply, Brak went shouldering through the crowd, angry-eyed.

Before he had half crossed the public square, he looked up. So did a thousand others, gaping.

A great ball of fire whizzed over the wall. It struck the face of one of the buildings, raining down tendrils of flame. Shrieking people fled in panic.

At once, Mustaf, Huz and the other nobles vanished from the balcony. Suddenly a whip cracked, twining itself around the barbarian's middle.

An officer mounted on horseback snaked the whip loose, shouted at Brak:

"You—and all the rest of you able-bodied men gawking there! To the walls! The Gords have not chosen to wait till dawn. We are being attacked!"

Chapter X

THE shod hoofs of the officer's mount struck fire from the cobbles of the square as he attempted to ride on. He cracked his lash over the backs of the citizens.

"Women and children to the houses! Men to the walls! The Gords are attacking!"

All around the big barbarian, people began to thrust and shove. Wails of terrified children blended with the sharp poppings of the whips Mustaf's officers were using to drive the reluctant males toward ladders which led up to the battle ramparts at the top of the mighty walls. Another fire-pot came arching through the black heavens.

A hundred men and women fled from beneath it. Many of them ran too slowly. The fireball struck. Brak choked in horror at the sight of dozens of human beings engulfed in a bath of hell-bright flame. Like condemned souls writhing in torment, the people disappeared, immolated in the small lake of fire that spread across the cobbles, then simmered out. A ghastly reek of charred

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flesh suffused the air. More of Mustaf's officers were riding roughshod through the mob. They cut out whole companies of men by means of the whips. Beyond the great walls, voices were raised in savage war cries. Those cries, and the threat they signalled, at last made the officer's' whips unnecessary.

Most of the men, realizing at last the peril that menaced the city, turned of their own accord toward the dozens of ladders, went clambering up.

The balcony on which Mustaf and Huz al Hussayn had stood remained empty, haunted by flickering shadows cast by another fire-pot burning itself out just below. Dismally Brak realized he had little chance of locating the vizier now. Things were in too chaotic a state. Reluctantly, he turned and shambled toward the outer wall.

At least from the rampart he would be able to keep up on the progress of the battle. Perhaps Mustaf ben Medi would return eventually to see how the fighting fared. At that time, Brak could tell him of his suspicions. To be truthful, Brak suspected the vizier would dismiss his tale as idle supposition. Huz would certainly deny it vehemently. His advancement depended upon his being the savior of the city. Besides, Brak felt certain that the wily Ilona had never revealed to Huz that she served the Gords, or even hinted thus.

Waiting his turn at the base of the ladder, Brak pondered on how Ilona might have come to the city. Shipwrecked like himself, had she been cast ashore? Or had she rejoined her own people first, and only later infiltrated Rodar's kingdom to menace it from within? Either way, her arrival had been disastrous.

Presently Brak's turn came to climb the ladder. He scrambled up. One of Mustaf's officers waited at the top, bawling instructions. More fire-pots flashed through the night sky. The Gord artillery officers had not quite got the range as yet. For every ball of flame which landed within the square, half a dozen fell short.

Brak joined a long chain of men passing heavy stones up one ladder and along the rampart to a pitifully small rock-caster, one of four ramshackle siege machines on view along the platform. Even as he labored, tossing the heavy stones to the next man in line, Brak stared in fascination at the scene revealed on the plain below the walls.

THE Gord army—it looked several thousand strong—had advanced to well within a half-league of the mighty rampart. Torches by the hundreds winked around the numerous heavy siege engines casting fire-pots

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and mighty boulders which began to batter at the walls. Each time one of the latter struck, the platforms swayed, and faint creakings shook the wall's foundation.

The staff of a great banner was planted at the forefront of the Gord force. The banner itself was roped and pegged at the corners. A gigantic image of the horned goat-god of the Gords, lit by reflection from torches, leered at the defenders.

Drawn up behind the enemy siege engines and the encamped foot soldiers were the scythe-chariots, row upon row of blade-wheeled juggernauts. The helmet-plumes of their drivers danced in the wind. Their blades glinted blue. The chariots were of no use in such a siege, Brak realized. But should the walls be breached, as the Gords were attempting to breach them now with the flying boulders, then the scythe-chariots could sweep in unopposed. This thought seemed to be in everyone's mind, including that of an officer who rushed down the line:

"Pass the rocks quickly, citizens! If the Gords once penetrate the walls, those chariots will be impossible to stop. They will thunder to the holy of holies, claim the Sacred Lamb Fleece and hand us defeat before we have begun to oppose them! If ever they capture the Fleece, we're finished. So bend your backs to it, men! Pass the rocks faster!"

Actually the officer's pleas were futile. Already the softer citizens pressed into service were showing signs of flagging. Men fainted or reeled away, retching, not accustomed to the labors of war. Even the officers' whips could not drive them back. Brak felt a vast sense of weariness, futility creep into his bones.

Some dark conspiracy was afoot. It involved Huz and Ilona, he knew. He foresaw unguessable destruction coming soon. What form it would take, he could not say. But he had seen enough of Ilona's power to know that the citizens of Rodar's city-state would not be prepared to counter it.

The rock-casters of the Gords worked with meticulous precision, slamming the walls with telling regularity once the artillerists found the proper range. Tremor after tremor shook the ramparts. The night wore on in a kind of delirium.

Soon Brak's hands were blistered and raw from tossing the heavy stones passed up the ladders from large carts coming and going in the square below. Gradually the stars began to pale. False dawn approached. The bombardment of the Gords did not slacken. Indeed, it grew more intense.

OFFICERS passed a ration of sour wine to the defenders. The taste of it did little to rouse

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Brak's flagging spirits. As the soldier carrying the fat wineskin was passing down the line, Brak called out:

"Soldier? It is important that I speak with the vizier. Can one of your officers locate him?"

The soldier was in short temper: "It is more important that you stay at your post, clod. Unless, of course, you wish to perish by letting the Gords conquer. As for Mustaf—" The soldier spat. "—his whereabouts are unknown. Probably he's huddled under silk coverlets, surrounded by a thousand troops in his bedchamber. Back to work!"

The big barbarian had no further opportunity to argue. Covered with soot and sweat, he returned to the task of passing the stones. Perhaps he should slip away from the ramparts to the house of Phonicios. In the event the siege was successful, the merchant who had befriended him might need his sword-arm to defend his very doorstep.

As Brak was mulling this question, a new shout of alarm rose from the ramparts, followed by a mighty crash. The entire platform shook violently.

"The wall is breached!" someone shrieked. "Jaal preserve us, the wall is in ruins!"

Work stopped entirely. Men clung precariously to their perches. Below and to the right, a sizeable amount of rubble lay at the foot of a fresh hole in the wall. Above the boulder-sized opening, a fissure appeared. Rapidly it widened, spread upward.

Men fled from the platform just above, too late. The crack reached the top of the wall. The platform shivered and snapped in half.

Citizens caught on either of the broken ends tumbled into space, fell screaming to their death on the rubble-heap below. All around Brak, men began to curse and mumble fearfully to themselves. Out on the plain, the scythe-chariots had moved forward in tight ranks, preparing to enter the city. Already several companies of Gord foot-soldiers had rushed to the breach. A few penetrated and were engaged in bloody combat.

At last the defenders succeeded in blocking off the flow of Gords through the shattered wall. Engineer companies rushed up with carts full of boulders, which they heaped in front of the breach. But other cracks were appearing in the wall now. And the thundering pound of the enemy siege-rocks remained steady. All of the defense platforms began to sag visibly. Several sections were hastily evacuated.

Exhausted beyond exhaustion, Brak the barbarian threw a stone to the hands of his neighbor in the human supply line. Then another. Another. Blood from broken blisters trickled down his wrists. The sky lightened. War-

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horns sounded on the plain. Gord soldiers unpegged the ropes holding down the god-banner, readying to move it forward. Where, thought Brak, was Mustaf's mighty weapon of magic that could stem the impending defeat?

NOW Brak began to doubt that Huz had done anything more than promise aid to Mustaf ben Medi. Probably the vizier had already taken ship from the port, abandoning his people to a fruitless struggle in which they would be slaughtered.

The platform lurched, creaked. One greybeard beside Brak pawed at the air. Vainly Brak grabbed for him. He was a fraction slow. The old man slipped over the edge shrieking. He struck the cobbles of the square with a bone-mashing thud, just as an officer nearby cried:

"Evacuate the walls! Down the ladders! Hurry! *The wall's breached below us—!*"

Brak joined the mad exodus, reaching the bottom and leaping away just as another Gord missile came sailing through the weakened wall. In a cloud of stinging pumice, the platform overhead gave way. The last unlucky defenders half way down the ladders fell the rest of the way, pulped to red slime beneath whole sections of the wall which sheared off like rotten wood.

Brak narrowly missed being caught under the fall of debris. Now he stood with his hand across his brow to shield his eyes against the increasing glare of the sun. A voice broke out high and keening:

"Jaal! Jaal! *Aieeeeeeee—!*"

The person who had screamed was a burly officer up on one of the still-solid sections of the platform. The officer pointed back toward the center of the city. His hand trembled and his mouth hung slack. He dropped to his knees and began to sway back and forth, foaming at the mouth, biting his own lips in madness.

Brak swung around. So did a thousand others, a thousand more. A shadow fell across the square—

Smash.

Beneath Brak's naked feet, the cobbles rocked and shuddered.

Smash.

The earth trembled again.

Smash.

Brak pressed his palms against his naked flanks, digging his nails in. The pain told him that he was not mad.

All around rose wailing, cursing, moaning. Brak's neck ached because his head was thrown back to look at what had cast the shadow.

Smash.

The bronze foot came down again. Buildings swayed.

Smash.

Men tore at their clothing,

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their flesh, convinced that the final holocaust was upon them.

Smash.

Great cracks radiated out in the paving each time the bronze foot came down.

GILDED with sun-shafts that shone over the rooftops, a giant came striding along one of the broad avenues which led to the walls from the city's heart. Its shadow fell ten blocks ahead of it. It was the mighty bronze statue of Jaal the Leveller, twenty times as tall as a man, and its huge head was turning, and its cyclops eye shone nearly as bright as the sun itself as it walked.

Smash, smash, smash.

The buildings between which the idol walked were as toys by comparison to its size. With each step the incredible colossus started the earth a-trembling. From the various buildings men and women leaned out to glimpse the the walking nightmare. The idol was perhaps five squares distant now, its shadow engulfing hundreds of men huddled together in the main square, around Brak.

Smash, smash, smash.

Onward it came, great bronze-scaly arms swinging, great bronze legs lifting. Along its route men and women driven out of their minds by the sight hurled themselves from windows in suicidal frenzy. Brak's mind throbbed with disbelief as the colossus kept coming, hugely real.

"Run!" men were crying. "Save yourselves! Jaal the Leveller has turned against us!"

At once the defenders around Brak began to flee. They scattered across the shadowed square as the idol continued its march.

More shouts rose from those nearest the point where the avenue opened onto the square:

"Hold! Don't be afraid! Look, the vizier is coming—leading the giant!"

Here and there, frightened souls continued their headlong plunge into doorways around the square. Most, however, stopped. Brak went loping toward the square's opposite side. He'd caught a glimpse of a burnished chariot. As he joined the press pushing nearer to the avenue, he saw runners ahead of the chariot, which was drawn by three matched ebony warhorses.

Within the chariot rode Mustaf ben Medi. Beside him, smiling, preening-proud and splendidly-attired, was Huz al Hussayn.

Smash, smash, smash.

The idol continued its march down the avenue, a square to the rear of the chariot. Mustaf had his hands raised, palms downward. He was shouting to the people in the buildings along the route, attempting to quiet them. But the frightened dwellers in the buildings paid more attention

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to the idol than to Mustaf and Huz.

The vizier signalled for the chariot to halt. The runners caught the bridles of the war-horses, brought them pawing to a stop. Mustaf consulted with Huz al Hussayn. The latter nodded, turned in the chariot. With a theatrical flourish, he made a gesture to the gigantic idol.

Its left foot came down, *smash*, rocking the earth. The foot did not move again.

BRONZE cast back the sun's rays. The colossus stood immobile, head inclined downward. Its huge cyclopean eye pulsed with pearly white radiance, the only sign that it lived.

From windows closest to the chariot, feeble cheers went up, followed by shrieks of joy. All at once the temper of the crowd changed. Beaming, Mustaf signalled the runners. The chariot lurched forward.

A lane opened across the square. Through this the chariot rolled. The idol began to walk again, pulverizing the pavement with each step. People near Brak pressed ahead, anxious to witness the passing of the marvel, yet trembling too as the huge shadow flickered over them.

Brak's neck ached violently from craning upward. A nagging fear worried the edge of his mind. Mustaf and Huz had calmed the crowds by showing that the bronze colossus was under their control. Yet Brak was certain that The Thief-Taker's spirit must be activating the monster. That meant the idol was actually under Ilona's guidance, wherever she was. Huz did not possess the skills of sorcery to work the feat.

Unless, of course, Brak thought suddenly, Huz had killed the witch after wresting her secrets from her.

As the idol lumbered past, making Brak's teeth rattle every time it stepped, the big barbarian felt a rush of relief. That must be it! Ilona was dead! Perhaps this was one time when Huz's duplicity boded good, rather than evil.

The Jaal statue slowed as it approached the wall. It stopped again, swinging its monstrous one-eyed head to encompass the entire horizon. People shoved up beside its great bronze feet, to whisper and to marvel.

The city wall barely reached to the idol's middle. From the plain outside, cries of consternation and horror from the entire Gord army could be heard. A jubilant officer on one of the remaining sections of platform cupped his hands around his mouth, bawled down:

"The Gord chariots are turning! The goat-god banner is struck! The Gords run—*in terror!*"

Still the idol stood peering over

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the wall like some grotesque, brainless child of gigantic size. Near its feet, people began an impromptu dance, cheering hysterically. In their chariot Huz and Mustaf smiled at one another, accepting the plaudits of the crowd. A scene of desolation only moments ago, the square now rang with victory-cries, laughter, wild relieved sobs. Soldiers slapped one another's backs. Men capered, made coarse jokes about the cowardice of the Gords.

In the midst of all this confusion, no one was prepared for the sudden movement of the statue.

A few people clustered at its feet sensed a change. They looked up curiously. The white fire in the idol's eye was pulsing—

Without warning, its mighty bronze foot lifted above the heads of the crowd. The food came down—

Smash.

Jaal the Leveller stamped on three dozen citizens and more, crushing them all.

FRESH panic broke out around the idol's feet, where the cobbles ran with rivers of blood squirting from the corpses of the victims. The idol lifted both its bronze hands. It formed them into fists.

With two blows it smashed the high city wall to bits.

Shrieking and cursing at each other, Mustaf and Huz struggled with the traces of their chariot. The horses pawed the air and neighed in terror. Jaal reached out, grasped two sections of the wall still standing, shook them. The entire structure from one edge of the square to the other began to shudder and crack.

A moment later, avalanches of rock and rubble fell inward upon the hapless thousands clustered in the wall's shadow.

Nearer the avenue than the wall, Brak found himself buffeted, nearly upset by the cattle-like stampeding of the terror-maddened people. Through the dust rising from the shattered ramparts, Brak heard war-horns blast again. A shout echoed from many throats. All around, hands pointed upward.

Brak's belly wrenched as he glanced that way. On one of the highest rooftops overlooking the square stood a slender girl, pale-robed, arms outstretched toward the idol. Her blonde yet gray-streaked hair blew in the wind.

"Ilona," Brak breathed.

Abruptly, he was shoved, hurled along in the sudden flight of people down the avenue toward the heart of the city. He fought free of the running mob, flattened against the wall of a building. He watched the holocaust in the square as the luckless ones who did not run swiftly enough were pulped under the feet of Jaal when the idol turned full around

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and began to march into the city again.

Smash, smash, smash.

Beyond the shattered ramparts now reduced to ground level in most places, there were whirling reflections, blue-bright, metallic. The scythe-machines of the Gords began to roll.

The Gord commanders had recognized Ilona on the rooftop. The columns of chariots swept toward the defenseless square. As the wheels turned behind the plunging horses, the whirling blades mowed down every bit of brush and weed on the plain, as they would shortly mow down a human harvest.

A more familiar chariot flashed, gleamed and vanished in shadows down a side street. Mustaf ben Medi and Huz—Huz whose self interest had betrayed an entire city—had managed to escape.

Brak remained pressed against the building as Jaal reached the mid-point in the square. *Smash, smash, smash.* At each step, hundreds more perished under his bronze feet.

The people fleeing past Brak were like wild beasts. All around, he heard senseless screaming, prayers, cries of, "To the temple of the Sacred Lamb Fleece! The gods will protect us there!"

The Jaal-statue was marching toward the avenue now, driving the frightened thousands before it. Across the way, Brak saw several people flee into doorways, obviously hoping for sanctuary on the rooftops. Wheeling, Brak ducked into a similar door.

He climbed several flights of sour stairs. He emerged on the sunlit roof overlooking the city. The buildings were close-packed in this quarter. Their upper stories nearly touched. People were utilizing this escape route. But Jaal did not spare them.

On the street's opposite side, the idol reached out as it passed. With one sweep of its fist it demolished an entire row of six structures, sending buildings and human wreckage tumbling in one awful cloud.

But the building on whose roof Brak had taken refuge survived. Jaal passed it by. Thus Brak the barbarian saw the final horror of all—the huge idol somehow scooped up its mistress.

Hair streaming like gold in the wind, Ilona stood on the idol's right shoulder. She clung to its bronze ear as it marched ahead through a field of corpses. Her head was thrown back, red-mouthed. Though her voice could not be heard above the noise of Jaal's footsteps and crashing buildings, Brak could see that she was shrieking with triumphant laughter.

Behind, in the square, the first of the Gord scythe-chariots rolled in.

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Chapter XI

AFTERWARD, Brak the barbarian was unable to tell a coherent story of how he managed to reach the central square of Rodar's city. But reach it he did, via the rooftops, along with thousands of others.

What he remembered of it was nothing more than a series of fragmentary, nightmarish impressions—

Jaal's monstrous bronze-cast head swaying past the building on which Brak had taken cover.

Ilona's hair like a yellow-gray banner.

The Gord chariots in the streets below, hub to hub, moving rapidly, six ranks to a squadron, four chariots to a rank, harvesting the stragglers. Whirling blades spat back shards of silvery sunlight, sprayed great curtains of blood against the walls of buildings as scores of Rodar's people were caught by the blades and mutilated piecemeal.

Brak recalled watching the idol turn aside, go lurching and stumbling into another quarter of the city. There, the armories were located. Over the rooftops, its great torso and destructive hands were visible, the speck of Ilona still clinging to its shoulder.

Brak recalled a wide gulf between rooftops. He leaped it somehow. He also recalled the pitiful wails and screams of those whose strength was not sufficient to carry them across.

He followed the human river flowing off the rooftops and down through labyrinthine passages in some spacious building. He spilled out with the hundreds, the thousands into the sprawling central plaza before the vast, gracefully-columned Temple of the Sacred Lamb Fleece.

To the westward, above the tallest buildings, Jaal the Leveller could be seen, his lower body hidden in a cloud of dust from the wreckage of the structures he pulverized in his path. The noise of the idol's march had become so familiar that Brak all but forgot it as he ran this way, that. Somewhere in the square he hoped to find the people to whom he owed his last loyalty when the final battle came.

He was certain the battle would be at hand soon. Jaal's turning aside was only a temporary diversion. Ilona had directed the monster into the area where the army's weapons were stored. Even now, the gigantic idol could be seen turning, smashing a path back toward the central square.

Terrified crowds flowed up the steps of the Lamb Fleece temple. Plunging through the mob, Brak saw only unfamiliar faces, and the wreckage of the altar at the side of the square where the great idol of Jaal had formerly stood.

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Across the way, the equally tall statue of the goddess Ashtir stared helplessly down on the rioting thousands around her wheeled feet. The fleeing people cursed her, threw rocks at her base as they passed, for she had failed them.

BRAK struggled into the temple. The crush was unbelievable. Time and again he was smacked or shoved against a pillar. He was forced to extricate himself by using his fists and kicking savagely. Despite the best efforts of the acolytes who guarded the holy of holies, its teakwood gates had been torn from their bronze hinges. The inner sanctuary, a cool, pale chamber where beams of sun drifted down, was thronged wall to wall.

There, above another immense altar, a scrap of something hung from a thick ring of solid gold. The ring was supported on two tall, intricately carved pillars. A bar of sunlight struck part of the fleece which hung from the ring. The fleece was revealed to be gray, ancient, even moth-eaten. But in front of this sacred relic hundreds were kneeling, saying their final death-prayers.

A balcony ran around the entire chamber. On all sides of it, groups of soldiers and acolytes watched the scene of panic below. Far across the room, Brak espied a thatch of reddish hair.

Stumbling, staggering, panting, he fought his way through the kneeling supplicants while screaming, pandemonium, roars and crashes of destruction echoed from without.

"Calix! Phonicios!" Brak shouted.

The reddish head turned. Brak saw familiar blue eyes. Then saw another stocky figure with a gray shot beard. In moments, he was surrounded by Phonicios's householders. Like most everyone else in the city, they had sought the refuge of the temple.

Phonicios's face was wan with fright as he clapped Brak's arm feebly. "Barbarian! We thought you dead at the gates."

"Nearly," Brak replied, dizzy with weariness. Calix braced him up. Brak noticed Saria standing beside the freedman, head bowed in prayer. "At least we can stand together if the end comes," he finished.

"Do not say that!" Phonicios exclaimed. "Surely Mustaf will be able to halt the bronze monster."

"Nothing can stop it," Brak returned. "Ilona controls it. Gods! If a sword would avail against it, I'd give my life. So would a thousand others here, I'll wager. But nothing can stand against a god of bronze."

Saria's gentle eyes gleamed, wet with sorrow. "This never was your quarrel, Brak."

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"Perhaps not at the start," he answered. "Yet it became mine. The least I can do is await the end of it like a man, among the people who befriended me." One of Brak's brawny hands lifted to the kneeling hundreds all around. "If I knew the prayers they're saying, I would even join in."

Phonicios was about to speak when suddenly, from outside, more rioting thousands attempted to press into the already close-packed temple.

"Jaal!" they cried. "Jaal nears the square!"

Smash, smash, smash.

The screams rose into the sunbeams drifting into the chamber. The floor trembled.

"Kneel, daughter!" Phonicios dropped to his knees. "And you, Calix, my good steward. Let us pray together, that our death from the gods will be swift and —" Phonicios cried out in alarm as, directly ahead of him, a citizen pitched forward, kicking and writhing.

From the man's back protruded an arrow whose quills still quivered.

Brak realized that the arrow had been aimed at Phonicios's back. Only the merchant's kneeling had prevented a hit. Fresh shouting broke out. Heads lifted. Brak whirled.

"It's Huz," Calix whispered, eyes round as blue stones. "And he—*Saria!*"

Another arrow came bolting down from the balcony. Huz was crouched just behind and to one side of the great ring which held the Sacred Lamb Fleece. Brak heard Saria cry out, saw her sag. The arrow stuck from her right shoulder.

Menacing the people on the balcony with his freshly-nocked bow, Huz bawled down in the sudden silence:

"Stand aside,cattle! It's Phonicios I came here to finish—Phonicios, the hypocritical pig who has caused me all this calamity."

HUZ'S eyes were glazed, maniacal. He drew back the bowstring. Along the balcony, soldiers were running at the crazed merchants from both directions. Bedraggled, his greasy hair flying, Huz spun around, saw them, released the bowstring. The arrow sank into the throat of the first soldier on his right. The man pitched back.

The soldiers racing in from the other side hesitated. Their commander cried, "Move forward, you cowards! Seize him! He is the one who fled from the vizier's chariot! The one responsible for betraying us—for loosing Jaal!"

When the crowd heard this, they had a ready target for their hate. They began to shriek filthy epithets and wave their fists. On the balcony, Huz looked derang-

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ed, his mind cracked by all the misfortunes which had befallen him. He drew back a step, swinging his bow one way, then another.

Still the soldiers hesitated. There was little to be gained by capturing a madman when they would all die soon enough.

Smash, smash, smash.

The temple rocked. Outside, the screaming was continuous, ear-deadening. A red curtain of fury dropped over Brak's mind, blinding him to reason. It wiped out his weariness and his knowledge of the futility of revenge. That armor-clad, scraggle-bearded apparition capering on the balcony was the person who had released havoc upon the city—

Leaping across the fallen Saria whose eyes were closed and whose gown bloomed with an ominous flower of blood around the shaft of the up-thrusting arrow, Brak began to run.

He kicked aside any who got in his way. Straight to the base of the twin pillars he charged. Two captains in armor barred his path. Snarling, growling like a beast, Brak bowled them over. From the scabbard of one he pulled the man's shimmering broadsword.

He clamped the dull edge of the great weapon between his teeth. He leaped high. Monkey-like, he began to climb one of the pillars, using its flutings and carvings for foot- and hand-holds.

He raced upward with surprising speed. His muscles ached, tormented by the effort. But the sudden dam-burst of hate within him lent him new strength.

Above, the golden ring with the mothy fleece hanging from it blazed in sunlight, framed by the ring. Huz leaned from the balcony, bow bent. Brak kept climbing.

The arrow sang from the bow. It glanced from the haft end of the sword Brak clenched in his teeth. The arrow went skittering over the heads of the crowd. People wailed. Brak's left hand slipped.

He nearly plunged off the pillar. His fingers, gripping a carved animal-snout, nearly broke until he was able to take hold with his other hand and, bracing his feet, continue his swift climb.

Huz's face was a phantasm, seeming to float in the sunlight framed by the great gold ring. Brak was nearly to the top of the pillar. Armor flashed. The soldiers, spurred by Brak's determination, charged in.

Huz shot another arrow out of the quiver on his shoulder. The soldier nearest him pitched forward on his face. Huz disappeared.

BRAK threw his left hand high, grasped the bottom of the gold ring, which was thick as a

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man's arm. Abruptly Huz came into sight again. He moved with the swiftness of one in whom madness had produced exceeding strength. Huz's blade licked out, darted down toward the ring as he leaned far over the balcony rail.

Hanging from the ring by both hands, Brak dangled in space, helpless if Huz were to hack at his gripping fingers—

Instead, Huz's sword-point snaked under the edge of the Sacred Lamb Fleece. Huz's hand twitched. The Fleece was jerked upward through the air by the point of the sword.

An instant later Brak clambered up hand over hand, stood swaying inside the gold ring. Huz had raced away from the balcony edge, the Fleece in his grasp. His arrow and quiver lay discarded.

Fresh moanings and sobbings rose from the packed temple floor. Even as Brak swung his weight to get the gold ring moving—now further away from the balcony, now closer—he understood dimly what Huz planned. He had snared the Fleece in desperation. He intended to rush out to the Gords, turn the relic over to them and thus give them the victory. In return, no doubt he would expect his own life to be spared.

The ring swung far out from the balcony, paused, swung inward—and Brak leaped.

His hands groped for the balcony rail as he flew through the air. With one hand, he missed. His other found purchase. In an instant he was over the rail and racing for a staircase where confused, befuddled soldiers were attempting to pursue the vanished Huz.

Smash, smash, smash.

The very temple walls rocks as Jaal drew nearer the central square. Up the staircase Brak raced, two risers at a time. He bowled soldiers aside in twos and threes. Several called for him to halt, but only feebly. He was a fearsome sight. His great body was hacked and scarred by recent wounds. His long braid flew. There was a glare of rage in his eyes.

Presently Brak was alone on the spiral stone stair, racing upward and upward, around and around. He jerked to a halt, mighty chest heaving. Breath raced hard in and out of his lungs.

From the clamor of voices and the continual rocking, grinding, thudding which signalled the approach of the witch-driven Jaal, Brak sorted out another sound. It was lighter, more rapid than the others.

The sound of sandals whacking stone as their owner fled. Huz!

Leaping forward again, Brak soon reached the top of the staircase. Sunlight blazed. He plunged past an ornamental lattice-work

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doorway standing ajar at the top. He pulled up short.

The wind blew briskly, whipping out the tail of the lion-pelt at his waist. On every side, smoke-palls rose into heaven. Brak could see the entire city from the temple roof. Nearly half the buildings were in ruins. Far below, in countless streets, the scythe-chariot blades whirled and flashed with light.

THE central square was still packed from edge to edge with thousands of persons. All struggled to enter the temple. Scarcely three squares away, marching stolidly forward, kicking out with bronze hands and bronze feet to demolish now this structure, now that one, came Jaal. A yellow banner marked the presence of Ilona riding on his shoulder.

"Huz?" Brak shouted. His voice was ragged, near to cracking. "Merchant?"

The sunny wind, so incongruous against the panorama of destruction spread out on every hand, bore Brak's words away. Cautiously Brak stepped forward. His spine prickled.

One more pace and he was free of shadow cast by the little cupola on the temple roof. He had emerged through the door set in one side of the cupola. The roof of the temple was high-railed, tiled with smooth mosaics, fitted here and there with marble benches. Nothing stirred, except the wind.

Brak turned his head slightly. The maddened merchant must be hiding directly behind the cupola, Brak reasoned. There was no other place of concealment.

Despite the coolness of the air, chill sweat began to race down Brak's chest. Slowly, slowly, he pivoted on his naked feet. Now he faced the cupola again. On each side it was nearly twice as wide as a man's body, affording good protection for a hidden assassin. Brak licked his lips.

Huz knew he was being pursued. He would doubtless anticipate the barbarian lunging either to the left or right, around the cupola.

Trying to ignore the mind-deadening beat of the idol's bronze feet crushing everything before it, Brak studied the height of the cupola roof.

He squatted down, hoping for the strength he needed, and the luck. The cupola was but a scant bit higher than his own head. Gazing up at it, Brak wrapped his fingers more tightly about the broadsword haft. He sprang.

In mid-air he kicked with his brawny legs. He seized the cupola's edge with his free hand, pulled himself up. Over and over he went rolling, slowing just in time to jump erect before he toppled off the other side.

In the split instant which it

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took him to gain his feet on the cupola roof, he saw a flash of ebony and armor directly below. Huz was crouched in the shadow of the cupola wall, ceremonial sword drawn from the gilt scabbard Mustaf must have provided him in the hour when Huz stood triumphant before the vizier, the benefactor of all the city.

Huz spun around. He gave a flick to his left arm. The Sacred Lamb Fleece dropped to the tiles. Huz brought his curved blade whipping around in an arc just above eye level, aiming for Brak's naked legs braced on the cupola roof.

LIKE some sort of savage ceremonial dancer, Brak let out a shrill, wordless scream of rage and jumped up, lifting both feet off the cupola. The blade slashed by. Brak's feet slammed the roof as he came down. He bent his knees, straightened them, propelled himself forward through the air. As he fell, he whipped his sword around toward Huz's neck.

The disgraced merchant quickly darted out of the way. Brak scrambled up. The two enemies circled one another. Huz's fine trappings were begrimed, torn in many places. The ornate gold circlet which had replaced the scrap of rag to bind up his long black hair had slipped. As a result, strands of greasy-dark hair blew around Huz's cheeks like the snaky tendrils of a medusa. Huz's long nails seemed to twitch and bend as he grasped his sword-handle tighter, crouching, circling, circling—

Brak circled too. In Huz's eyes was complete unreason. Dollops of spittle hung and gleamed in the hairs of the beard on his chin.

"Slut spawn!" Huz breathed, teeth ugly yellow in the sunlight. "Dung man! Until you came, Phonicios was helpless. 'Tis you I owe death more than the swine from the Guild."

Cautiously, cautiously, their feet shuffling in rhythm, the two men moved round and round.

Their eyes never left one another. Each waited for the other to make the fateful lunge.

Brak's voice was a hardly-human growl:

"Merchant, your mind has betrayed you. For you owe me not a whit. It is the people of this city who owe you, merchant. Owe you a dying ten times worse than any dying ever known before. Look, merchant. Look down at the square. Look out yonder in the streets, where the dead lie by the scores. The dead cry for payment, merchant. It was you who loosed that bronze giant on them. You who let Ilona gull you into believing she was an ally."

"I did not know she served the Gords!" Huz shrieked wildly. "When I found her sitting in a tavern, she said she came from a

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far land, had been a prisoner of the Gord admiral, had been cast up on the shore in the aftermath of the sea battle—" His voice keened higher. "I only used her to take back what Phonicios took from me. *I did not know!*"

"Phonicios never stole your life," Brak growled. "You have stolen thousands in return."

"I'll steal yours before I'm finished, dung-man!" Huz cried, feinting suddenly to the left.

Brak readied his guard. Huz cackled, whipped around on his right toe, came charging across the roof straight at Brak.

Because of the tremendous exertions his mighty frame had endured the past hours, Brak's responses were a fraction slow. He jerked back on his right foot, hauled up his broadsword, having no time to thrust. Huz's curved weapon hacked against the barbarian's sword.

Sparks flew, metal rang. Brak heaved. Huz danced backward, off balance. He capered a moment, arms waving wildly.

Brak dodged in for the killing stroke. He had misjudged. Huz's flailing sword-arm chopped the air near Brak's own arm. His blade dug into Brak's bicep, sliced free.

THE big barbarian nearly doubled over with the exquisite agony of the thin steel sliding in and sliding out of his muscle. He managed to stay on his feet by sheer will.

Huz pressed his advantage, tittering. His eyes were no more than glazed stones now, staring demonically out of his head. While Brak swayed, struggling to remain on his feet, Huz came gliding in under his guard.

The big barbarian turned, hacked downward. His blade missed Huz's arm, caught his sword. Instantly Huz whipped his steel back from the contact. He hurled his right arm to the rear until it was stretched to its limit. Then he slashed it forward again, sword-blade a horizontal flash of white brilliance in the sunlight.

At that moment, Brak's brain clouded. His knees unlocked. He keeled onto his face, slamming hard on the mosaics. Huz's swath missed.

Brak flopped over onto his spine. Short cape fluttering, Huz scuttled in close, leaned over, grinning as he drove his blade downward toward Brak's heart—

Two things Brak did then. Small, desperate things.

He kicked out with his right foot, catching Huz's shin.

And at the same time he lifted his right wrist; lifted it though it weighed heavier than all the silver ingots in the universe.

His broadsword's point stood straight up just as his kick sent Huz off balance, spilled him over. The merchant's mouth flew

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open. He fell straight onto Brak's blade. The point entered his throat just behind the jawbone and finally jarred, scraping, on the back of the skull.

Huz al Hussayn hung there. The curved sword dropped from his fingers. His legs kicked, thrashed. With his head impaled yet still alive, he stared downward at Brak. His eyes flashed a final horrific disbelief. His tongue shot out, purpling. And, like a boar on a spit, he died.

GROANING, Brak rolled to one side. He let go of the broadsword.

With the great weapon still projecting from his throat, Huz slumped on the tiles. Brak lay a moment, panting and blinking in the sun.

Warm stuff leaked down his arm. Gradually, sounds penetrated into his pain-thumping mind: the cries of the citizens trapped in the square below; the crash of falling buildings; the grinding noise each time Jaal took a step.

Awkwardly, Brak climbed to his feet. He was near to retching. He bent down, tore a long length of material from Huz's cloak. He staggered against the cupola, leaned there. He wound the black stuff around and around his upper arm, pulling it so tight his face contorted in agony and his teeth were bared.

At last, however, the knot was firm. The flow of blood from the long wound was temporarily stanched.

Brak wiped his eyes. He shambled around the cupola, retrieved the Sacred Lamb Fleece and tottered toward the roof rail. Perhaps if he showed the ancient relic to the crowds below, they would take heart.

He stumbled against the rail, the Fleece flapping in the wind. Across the square, the Jaal idol had paused. Its monstrous eye surveyed the thousands rioting in panic at its feet. That cyclopean eye burned ten times whiter-hot than the sun. And Ilona's hair streamed out as she rode the statue's shoulder.

Brak could imagine her mocking smile of victory as she watched the masses waiting to be trampled under the idol's feet. With a weak grimace, Brak peered down at the mothy relic over his arm.

Idiocy to show it to the people.

Idiocy to fight any longer.

The day had been lost.

In a moment more, Jaal the Leveller would begin to walk toward the temple. The finis would be written to the history of the city-state of Rodar, Prince of the Two Bays.

Weakened, full of this sense of defeat, Brak leaned on the rail in the wind, shaking his head.

Then, abruptly, he stiffened.

He laughed.

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It was wholly mad. Desperate and unthinkable.

But was it not better than waiting?

At least—he laughed a second time—he could die like a warrior.

Staring intently at the one remaining statue in the square, the bronze image of the begirdled Ashtir, Brak heard a sound. He turned.

Towering to the sky, Jaal was moving again.

Chapter XII

ARM outflung, Ilona was rigid on the idol's shoulder. There could be no mistaking where she pointed.

She pointed at Brak.

In the square far below, thousands craned around, stared upward. Ilona's arm rose, snapped downward. Jaal changed direction. His bronze feet crushed several dozen not quick enough to dart back.

The Gord witch had sighted Brak silhouetted against the bright sky, the Sacred Lamb Fleece flung over his arm. Now Jaal the Leveller began to advance toward him, between masses of frantic citizens desperately struggling to stay out of his path. Ilona knew the significance of the Lamb Fleece, and she wanted it.

But Brak was already racing away toward the far side of the temple roof.

He pulled up short at the edge, peered over. Several stories below, a low, curved wing of the temple led around toward the side of the square where the gigantic statue of Ashtir flashed back sunlight from her bronzed flesh. Swallowing hard, Brak jumped up to the rail. He edged over the side and began a long, perilous descent via one of several carved pillars standing out from the temple's side.

Clinging precariously whole stories above the street, Brak was in clear sight of the thousands below. They saw that he had the Sacred Lamb Fleece wrapped around his shoulders, the tag-ends knotted at his throat like a cloak. Confused, alarmed outcries came from their throats.

The wind whipped at Brak. Its force threatened to dislodge his precarious hand-holds. But at last, panting, he reached the roof of the lower temple wing. He set off along it at a run.

Jaal the Leveller had turned in the middle of the square, lumbering after him. Soon Brak dropped down from the wing's roof into a narrow alley-way he had sighted from above. Pelting along this alley in thick shadow, he saw ahead the bronzed backside of the goddess Ashtir. At the statue's base were the great iron-rimmed wood wheels twice as tall as himself. By means of these wheels, he remembered Phonicios saying,

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the goddess was moved into the fields to bless the crops.

Once more, out in the square, Jaal the Leveller turned. *Smash, smash, smash.* The statue clumped toward the bronze goddess.

The barbarian reached the base of the female statue. He ran around one of the mammoth bronze heels, then the other. Finally he spied the outline of a narrow doorway in the rear surface of the left heel. An ornamental handle responded to his touch. Lamb Fleece flapping, he ducked into the musty, metal-smelling interior of the statue's foot.

Far overhead the hollow idol, light gleamed faintly. Something blackish swayed, outlined against the light. Brak seized with both hands, discovered it was a ladder of rope, leading upward.

Levers and pulleys, Phonicios had said. Levers and pulleys—

Brak was gambling with a city's life.

HIS mighty body was nearly at point of collapse, but still he managed to climb upward, rung after swaying rung. The light overhead seemed to recede, blur. He knew it was only a trick of his exhausted mind. Rung after rung he clambered, pulling himself at last, nearly spent, onto a crude platform.

The platform projected from the inner surface of Ashtir's face, just below the pupil-less eyes. The wind whistled through those two great eye-openings. The openings were slightly above Brak's head, affording him an oblique view of the sky. He got a terrible start when, suddenly, the head of Jaal, quite close, appeared in the space framed by the left eye. Jaal was moving closer—

In a moment Brak got a clear view of Ilona on Jaal's shoulder. Her face was strained, haggard, as she cried incantations and directions at the spirit-essence somewhere within the idol. Struggling for calm, Brak surveyed the arrangement of ivory-handled levers protruding up through the surface of the control platform.

He put both hands on the central lever. He tugged hard. With a scream of iron tires, the Ashtir idol began to roll forward.

Hastily Brak slammed the lever back in place. He had almost sent the statue thundering directly into Jaal's path.

Two other levers, set at angles on the right and left, offered promise. Brak found the right-hand one hard to move, bent his great back until the muscles stood out like serpents beneath the skin At last the lever freed.

Somewhere, pulleys whirred, dropped, clanked. Slowly, ponderously, the statue swung to the right.

Fresh frenzied cries broke out

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from the terrified populace. The Ashtir figure swung completely around. Brak could no longer see Jaal the Leveller.

He hauled back on the right-hand lever. Then he pulled the central one. The Ashtir statue shuddered, rolled forward. Far below, Brak heard a wooden crunching, grinding. Small houses? Sheds near the square? Impossible to tell. Brak only prayed that what he knew about The Thief-Taker was correct, to stay out of the way of the rolling juggernaut which Brak was forced to direct almost blindly. Through the eye openings he could see nothing but the sky now.

While the statue rolled, Brak clambered up in one of the open eyes. He peered down. Ahead, past more small buildings which the statue was demolishing as it rolled and bumped along, the idol's path would intersect a broad avenue. Far to the right Brak glimpsed the burnished cobalt of the two bays, with the long mole extending out toward the island which rose to form the pair of channels. Clinging precariously in the wind there in the open right eye of the goddess, Brak waited until the statue had nearly reached the avenue. Then he leaped back inside.

ONCE more he tugged frantically on the oblique right-hand lever. He heard the pulleys whirr and whine again. Creaking, straining, the goddess-statue swung into the center of the avenue.

Brak drew the middle lever back again. The statue began to roll faster. The street surface inclined down toward the harbor. It was impossible to slacken speed, Brak discovered, because of this slope in the paving.

The wheeled statue gained momentum, a bronze-breasted goddess seeming to float about the housetops.

Smash, smash, smash. Jaal came on, pursuing.

Brak fell across the central lever, laying his sweated cheek against the cool ivory knob. He sobbed with great ragged gasps. The opening gambit had succeeded. It was a sort of gargantuan jest, larger than life: one death-reeking idol lumbering in pursuit of another.

Yet upon the sex of the statue in which he was clattering swiftly down to the harbor, Brak had banked his final hope for success. He thought he heard Ilona screaming filthy imprecations at the Jaal-idol. Impossible. No sound could carry that far.

Yet the shuddering and thundering of the earth grew heavier by the moment. *Smash, smash, smash.*

The evil spirit-essence within Jaal had belonged to The Thief-Taker. Brak had gambled upon

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the essence of that spirit being as Phonicios had described it—lustful.

Now it was following its own lustful bent, if Brak could believe the thundering tremors which jarred even the mighty Ashtir image rolling along toward the harbor dead ahead. Exactly as it had done within a smaller Jaal-idol the night Phonicios' house was attacked, the lustful spirit of The Thief-Taker had gone in pursuit of the one thing which it notoriously craved above all others—a woman. A woman twenty times as high as a human being.

Hanging across the controls, Brak no longer cared what happened to him. If the Jaal-idol would follow the Ashtir statue into the harbor, perhaps the people would have a chance to turn back the invaders. Brak's body shuddered, twitched with each thud of the great wheels as Ashtir rolled over minor obstructions—shattered carts, shop awnings—in the avenue. His mind was darkening.

Smash, smash, smash. Jaal still pursued.

Brak wished that he could see Ilona's face as she rode the idol's shoulder, vainly trying to control the lustful essence of The Thief-Taker. For, a moment ago, between the ponderous thuddings of the bronze idol's feet, Brak had clearly heard sound that was not imagination. Above the wind, foul curses came drifting through the open eye-windows. Brak recognized Ilona's voice, screaming helplessly.

A purplish hand, seven-fingered, tickled Brak's forearm.

Goggling, he jerked back from the control lever.

Out of nothing, a fanged imp materialized.

The imp gibbered, whirling around the chamber inside the great bronze head.

Brak leaped back. He nearly pitched off the edge of the platform to fall down through the hollow statue.

Waving its seven-clawed hands, the imp spun around and round Brak's head, plucking at his face. A mad chittering filled the chamber.

Tired beyond all tiredness, Brak cursed and batted at the thing. His arm passed through it, stinging horribly at the contact.

OUT of the floor came twisting a cobalt serpent, coil upon moistly shining coil.

The serpent twitched toward Brak's legs.

A huge, disembodied human eye rocketed toward Brak's head. The eye wept blood-drops at which Brak tried to strike.

A voice rang in his ears. Then another. Then a dozen—cheeping, chittering, growling, moaning, sobbing.

A female corpse wrapped in

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white shrouds wrapped itself around him, laughing at him, teeth falling out, skin peeling away until only a skull grinned—

The air in the chamber grew black.

Scaly hands, distorted human shapes with obscene configurations whirled round and round Brak's head.

The big barbarian began to laugh hysterically as he batted at the things he could not seize.

Again he struck at air, again. He felt the clammy touch of the things yet he was unable to grapple with them.

A gryphon breathing fire opened its jaws, big as all the chamber, to swallow him. Brak stared into the flames that danced in its maw.

Dimly he remembered a sea-fight, magical creatures upon the water.

Not real! his brain cried.

This is Ilona's final trick. Mind-devils to drive you mad.

You cannot fight them with your hands, only with your brain.

They are not real!

They are shadow!

They cannot harm you—

A saber-tooth slid across the chamber floor, chomping at Brak's legs with its wet-dripping fangs.

Brak shouted and hurled himself against the chamber wall, shuddering, quaking, feeling his senses slip away.

In the midst of the welter of nightmare shapes materializing and vanishing all around, in the midst of the cacophony of weird shrieks, screams and laughter, Brak heard another sound. A distant, tinkling voice, calling:

"Barbarian? Barbarian? One way or another, my own power will destroy you. Barbarian? You are done—"

A gargoyle bit his belly.

A fifty-legged spider crawled down his spine.

A vulture with a tiny child's face pecked at his eyes.

Brak held his temples, shrieked unable to control himself.

A last, lost murmur in his brain called out, *They are not real! They cannot harm you—*

SUDDENLY, knowing he must resist or perish, Brak stood stock still in the center of the rocking chamber, just as the most horrific horror of all, an immense octopus-like thing with a thousand evil black-wet mouths along its tentacles, spun out of nowhere.

The monster enfolded him, prickling his skin, sending blazing bolts of mad, unaccountable terror through his skull—

Brak threw his arms wide like a man crucified.

His back strained.

His temple-veins stood out full of blood and near to bursting.

"Begone!" he screamed. *"Begone, nightmares!"*

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"Real, real!" a voice wailed in his mind or elsewhere. "They will *kill* you—"

"Begone, nightmares!"

Brak's throat was raw, blood-raw, crying it. He closed his eyes, hung his head back, dug his nails into his palms until blood ran.

With every last resource of courage in his mighty body strained to the ultimate, he roared like thunder:

"BEGONE!"

Simultaneously, the shapes popped, hissed, burned away, melted, leaving only stench.

And the great wheeled Ashtir statue gave a sickening lurch, dropping—

Brak was tumbled clear across the chamber. For a moment the immense head seemed to tilt forward, the whole statue swaying, tipping dangerously.

Distantly, water splashed, churned. Gasping, Brak crawled up into the open eye, hung there. Cold sweat turned the Sacred Lamb Fleece around his shoulders to a sodden cloak.

The Ashtir statue had lurched out to the end of the mole and dropped the short distance into the harbor. The great wheels still churned, though more slowly now, along the sloping rocky bottom. The surface of the water far below was foamed into immense waves which the Ashtir statue could not be causing. Brak clung in the eye, heard a grinding sound again. Suddenly the frightening shape of Jaal the Leveller lumbered into sight to the left of the Ashtir statue, whose huge wheels were spinning now, immobilized in the muck of the harbor bottom.

On Jaal's shoulder Ilona hung, tearing at her gown, her hair. She pounded her fists against the idol's bronze neck, a picture of demented panic.

Slowly the mighty bronze arms of Jaal the Leveller rose, stretched out.

Slowly the idol sloshed forward toward Ashtir, driven by the berserk spirit of The Thief-Taker.

Slowly the two giants met in ghastly embrace.

Jaal's brazen arms slipped around the woman also carved of bronze. Brak's perch became treacherous. Harder the Jaal-thing embraced the bronze woman, *harder*—

Ashtir began to crack apart. Below, in the hollow center of the statue's body, light flooded in. Brak was nearly blinded by the blaze of ghostly fire from the cyclopean eye of Jaal just in front of him.

Slowly, locked in the embrace, the two idols began to tip toward the water.

Brak had a fleeting impression of Ilona stretching out her hand to him. Her face was old, her hair no longer yellow but white, her voice cried over the noise:

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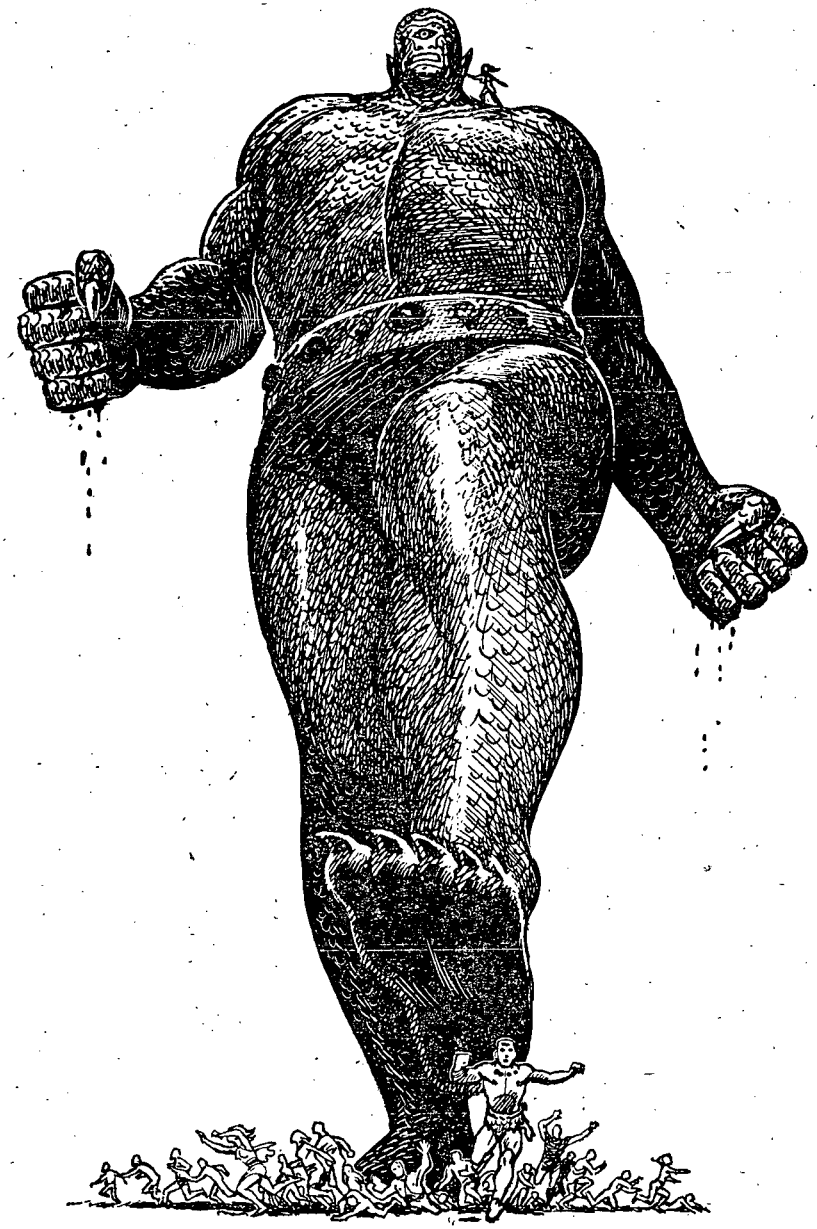

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"Barbarian— —I acknowledge —defeat. Stretch out your hand —save me from—"

A segment of collapsing bronze from the Ashtir statue's neck struck Ilona, smashed her against Jaal's bronze shoulder, stifling her scream, crushing her in a ghastly eruption of pulp and blood.

The whole world whirled around the big barbarian as the Ashtir statue cracked apart.

He fell through space, turning over and over; now toward the blazing sun, now toward the cobalt water. With a roar to shake the universe, both statues struck the sea, still locked together.

Brak hit a moment later.

He came shooting to the surface, retching and spitting. Far away, armor gleamed on the mole.

With a last effort of his tortured body, Brak the barbarian hauled himself along in the water. Behind him, eruptions and explosions burst through the harbor's surface. A great chain of bubbles streamed up from beneath the sea, popped open, exuding a death-smell that was blown to nothing on the wind.

Presently the sea was quiet except for a few small bubbles that signified the last settling of the idols in their grisly embrace at the bottom of the harbor.

Brak the barbarian struck his skull against the crumbled mole. He felt the stout hands of armored soldiers lift him from the water, pluck clumsily at the Lamb Fleece still knotted around his shoulder. He tried to speak:

"Here, here is the Fleece which —"

He knew nothing more.

SO it was that the people of Rodar's city-state, the Kingdom of the Two Bays, regained their holy emblem.

Soldiers rushed it to the central square, together with tidings that the idols had sunk beneath the water. At this news, the citizens rallied. They took to the rooftops and, after a battle which raged on through the night and all the next day, they hurled the invaders from the city, using weapons no more lethal than stones and arrows. But these weapons, discharged from roofs where the scythe-chariots were useless, won the day.

That second night also, trumpets blew on the plain. The disbelieving people saw the Gord retreat turn into total disaster as Prince Rodar appeared, not dead at all as the rumor had said, but only forced into hiding after his army's defeat at the frontier. The Prince had re-gathered scattered bands of soldiers and arrived at the city in time to catch the retreating Gord forces from the rear. On a field of blood he obliterated them, and their threat to harm his kingdom ever again.

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Caught between the pincers of army and populace, every last Gord warrior died. And, it was said, in their far-off capitol, the women, the graybeards and the children—the only ones left behind—went into perpetual mourning and smashed the idols of the goat-god in their temples.

But these tidings Brak the barbarian did not learn for many days, until he wakened again—this time under more auspicious circumstances—in the household of Phonicios.

Once more it was Saria who tended him. Her own light arrow-wound was on the way to healing. After a suitable period of rest, Brak grew impatient to be up and about.

Thus it happened that, one misty pink dawn, after Brak had been feted at court by Prince Rodar for several days and nights, a small group of people assembled in the courtyard of Phonicios' house.

AT the rear of the group, several servants were making coarse jokes about the vizier, Mustaf ben Medi, who had been banished for his bumbling. Phonicios shushed them with a stern look.

"This is a splendid pony, lord," Brak commented. He eyed the beast who stamped impatiently. "Far better than an outlander deserves."

Phonicios clapped the big barbarian's shoulder warmly. His face had filled out. He once more wore the robes of the chief of the Merchant Guild, the position having been restored to him by unanimous vote of his fellow-members.

"It's but a tiny particle of what you deserve, Brak," Phonicios said. "Except for you, this city would not stand here today."

Brak swung up on the pony's back. Saria stood close beside Calix. The freedman had his arm around her waist. Both bade Brak a warm farewell.

Phonicios grasped Brak's saddle-thong. "Why don't you stay? There is a place for you in my household, Brak. I'll promise you tasks worthy of your powers, and a respected position in the hierarchy of Rodar's city. The Prince himself said as much at court when he thanked you for what you had done for his kingdom."

Smiling sadly, Brak shook his head. "A tempting offer, lord. Were I to take it—" His shrug was simple, yet eloquent. "I would not be the man I am, born to wander the world until I find whatever it is that's waiting for me in Khurdisan."

He lifted his hand. The watchers in the lonely courtyard shielded their eyes against the misty pink sunrise until pony and man were lost among the maze of streets.

THE END

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A Vision of the King

By DAVID R. BUNCH

He came with his small black boat-things . . . patient . . . demanding . . . furious at the reluctance of his customers . . . but smug in the knowledge of the ultimates

PULLING his three blunt boats out of a cold-ball sunset he came into my range. And I shuddered, even at that far out shuddery he was for me. Not since a long time had it been this way, a crackling dry hum in the air and the heart racing like a shaft cracked loose from its load and everything standing back a little, just a little back to give me more room for dread. Or was it that at such times I shrank just a little and everything stepped back thus, not really, but was the same, and I was stepping in from all sides just a little, shrinking in tight to calculate disaster? Or was it more just now that I had a death-high fever, mental fever and torn flesh-strips of the brain, and unsettling, that made me see phantom things?

Well, anyway—

He came on, outside my window, far down the lanes of plastic, until I saw he was just at the line where it would be discussion, discussion in his own decision gears whether to swing and miss me or come on in for showdown and confrontation. With that dry-hum warning through the air and the heart racing wild I almost hoped him to swerve. And drag those boats on by. Far out. Maybe tomorrow—maybe some tomorrow—courage. At least not this anniversary of a pale and whining white yesterday. But there are so many anniversaries of our poor-show yesterdays. Ah, every day. But if we could pick a day, well, we'd pick it and have the lead-ball heart barely clicking a little beat as we stood up calm, icy-cold, and ice-eyed stared our doomsday down —a breezy flick of sleet, an ice storm of contempt, and HA, it's done. WE WIN!

GAWHANG!!—Yes, the fever

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was pounding worse and we had locked on danger, close in and coming on. And so we would not pick The Day, we would not. NO! The Day had picked us. Yes. AGAIN! And so we thought of all the days and all the times of little dyings and wondered why we did, and all the days and times of inconclusive deaths and wondered why we did, but yes, we did, we faked up courage, even though it was not our day for courage, we were not ready, and yet we were not ready to say we were not ready, our banners were out in black. At the very top-post point of the flagstaff.

White would have been easier, how much easier, white for surrender, but—well—

THE sound was high and whining at my ear, the manner was one of patience. "I came with these small boats," it said, "a long way. And yet they're not truly usual boats. I think it takes no keen thinking nor sharp-eyed analysis to see they're not truly the usual ships or boats. In fact, I think it really would be quite hard even with hard trying not to perceive what they really are."

I didn't know what to say. I finally said, turning and peering to try to see the speaker better, "Well, they're nice, quite nice and sort of shiny." Although I wasn't at all sure they were nice. In fact I thought they were probably quite the opposite from nice. Shiny—polished—yes, they were. And if he liked them—

"Nights and days, days and nights, I've pointed toward this place. From a long way out. I've seen your lights shining, I've heard noises. I'm keen on noises, very keen on noises, especially sounds of revelry—since my great choice is silence. I haven't hurried, but I've come. Steadily. And always dragging the blunt-boat objects. Let's just call them boats; they're suitable for a ship's long trip."

He started to unstrap one, the center one, which was black—they were all on small-wheeled skeleton trailers—and I wondered what was in store. Then, strange shadows leaping, he flicked his hand at a place and I saw a lid spring up to reveal a hungry mouth, a soft white mouth where one could lie at full length and be eaten in sick spongy pale softness. A long time. "It's nice," I said again, babbling the foolish sounds to break up the silence he nurtured, "quite nice. But perhaps you're at the wrong boat shop."

"I'm NOT," he said, "at the wrong stop. I'm HERE. And if through some lack of preparedness, some lapse in the way you have been, you feel all unfit for this honor, let us now have it said."

So he was leaving the way

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wide open for me to snivel. But I did not snivel. "I once dragged guns from place to place," I said, "and shot at adversaries. What I could see I could ward. Once. When I was young and had the heart to stand up, pure contest was everywhere. And I was in the lists. Life was a battle and I knew it. But now you come with unseen things, wrapped up in boxes—empty boxes!—Sure, I could have blasted you out there on the open reaches. For truth is I have felt you coming for longer than I care to know it. But tell me, would it have helped anything if I had blasted you at any time? Out on the open reaches?"

His eyes in his great-length face did not compromise, though I looked hard, stared for some hint of chance. They were black cold blots of hardest truth as he shook his head in the negative just for a little. "No," cold and completely final was the lone word of his answer, and even that was unnecessary. He too, I thought, seemed sorry that it was all so over and done with when the blunt boats came. After a suitable pause of sorrow and time for remorse, "The boats would get through in any event."

"Without you to drag them?"

"Even though you had blasted our approach around the clock, every day, all through, I still would have risen up and walked on in. At the Time."

"Then there is truly no hope?"

"Truly no hope. Except you accept what you would term 'the hopeless.' The battle you put up is what puts a problem in this thing for you. For everyone. Everywhere. Every time."

"Then I'll just accept one of these lovely boats, climb in and set sail," I said mockingly. "It's that easy, if I accept?" Were the shadows laughing?

"It's that easy." I had a little idea then that the black cold blots glittered just slightly as though in victory and mockery, but surely not. Surely this was truth, as true as any truth could ever be—final truth. And yet—

"How long would I have for last letters—if I accepted?"

This shook him. The cold blots compressed for an instant and a small frown of anger I noted tightened across his long face. "Acceptance, the kind I'm thinking of, would imply no time, absolutely NO TIME, for last letters. Besides, who would you write them to? The wind? A star? A hole in the ground?—Don't you see, that kind of thinking, that reluctance, the putting off, if you will, is the trouble, the whole trouble? That's why I have to drag these boats and wait on the outskirts, the perimeters of towns, the boundaries of countries, aye, even the edges of beds, until the last tick, the very last tick. I'm the king they keep in

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the beggar's role! And why? WHY? A misunderstanding, that's why."

A LONG shadow, one that hadn't moved ever, to my memory, in all of my times of living and lying here, now turned and twisted for a peep around a corner, and a riderless rocking chair started up to rock, surely powered by earthquakes. And that hum? That whine? Was a high wind rising out in the Unknown Country, land of the plastic peaks, or was it a rabble of ghosts now forming, an army to come in and get me?

"Do you have a contract?"

"A contract?"

"I mean, do you produce assurances along with the boat? Something that we could both sign? An ironclad kind of thing that would rule out all problems?"

"You and the boat are the contract. And me. We three. What more could be needed for the longest trip in the world?"

"I could ask for guarantees of absolutely no problems of any kind on the long trip."

"And if I assured you?"

"I STILL COULDN'T BELIEVE YOU!"

And so I had said it. I had finally revealed my cowardice, which he must have known all along. He said not another word as he busily set about strapping the unloosened boat-object to its skeleton trailer, and he saw to the security of the other two. There was no hopelessness about him, just a long patience showing in all of his small sounds and moves. And suddenly I had a larger vision of this thin dark form, saw him waiting outside burning cities as the bomb-freighted rockets came in and came in, or standing about the oceans as the tipping ships spun down, or attending at individual beds—EVERYWHERE. And here he had found time to furnish me with a choice of boats! For my trip. Suddenly I knew why he was such a true regal king, though kept in a beggar's role and generally uncrowned by a world of sullen subjects cursing and running. "Some time," I found myself shouting—"SOME OTHER TIME, SURE, BUT NOT NOW."

"I'll be back." And he left in a flurry of leaves coming down in my yard, ersatz leaves whirling down from many ersatz trees outside my window, and a cold wind whining on the plastic in a time of Seasons Change. Then the fever losed in again and I knew, YES knew that he would be back to finally sink all my ships, except for the one last blunt boat he would leave me. And that for the long ride . . . into the Dark King's shoreless oceans . . .

THE END

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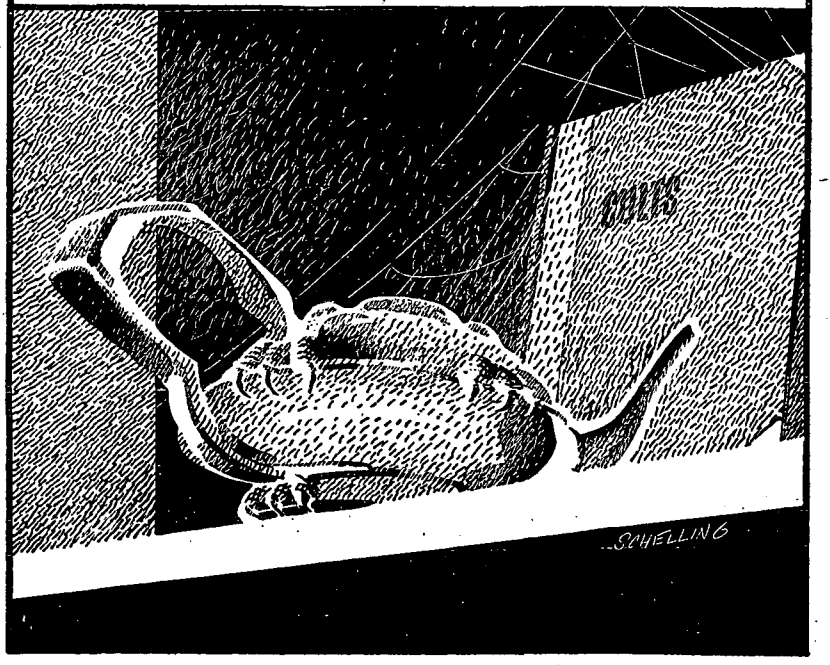
Melvin had the magic lamp, all right. And a literal minded genie. And a lot of problems, because the big lummox wouldn't do anything but . . .

HEAR and OBEY

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SCHELLING



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IT was the original Lamp of Aladdin, all right. The shopkeeper was most insistent on that point. "Yes, just like in the Arabian Nights," he assured Melvin, who was asking a lot of questions before laying five dollars on the line. "Yes, with the usual rules of operation: rub it, wait for the Genie, then wish whatever you want and get it; lose the lamp and you lose whatever you may have gained by it, once a new operator makes his or her primal wish. *You* know. Magic lamp."

"The price seems so—*low*," Melvin said, kneading the wadded bill in a perspiring fist, staring at the dull brass lamp on the shelf behind the counter, the very old-fashioned sort with large ear-shaped handle on one end and curving spout on the other. "For what one can gain by owning it, I should think the cost would be much higher . . ."

The old proprietor shrugged. "Probably should. Except who knows what to charge for something priceless? I could ask a zillion bucks, I guess, but people with that kind of cash don't *need* magic lamps. They just rub their money-belts to get their wishes granted." He gave his head a philosophical tilt and scratched his grizzled temple hair as he added, "Seems to me that—poor folks being the likeliest buyers—I had to put the price in their range, do you see now, sonny?"

"But," said Melvin, still unconvinced, and unconsciously voicing the question that had been asked about the lamp for countless ages of forgotten centuries, "if it's as good as its reputation leads one to believe—*why are you selling it?*"

"Oh, use your head, sonny," sighed the shopkeeper. "If I don't use it for my *own* ends, there's obviously some kind of 'hitch' to owning and operating the thing!"

"Aha!" exclaimed Melvin. "I *thought* so!"

The shopkeeper shrugged again and spat lazily into an ornate vase behind the counter. "Didn't take no particular *genius* on your part. I wouldn't brag about it if I were you."

"Well, what's the hitch?" Melvin demanded, changing the sodden five-dollar bill to his relatively drier fist.

"*Ha!*" croaked the old man. "I may be getting on in years, but even a gray-headed geezer knows better than to undersell his own merchandise. A good salesman stresses the *plus*-features of his stock. Business is business."

"But you're misrepresenting—!" Melvin began.

"Who says so?" yawned the shopkeeper. "I *told* you there's a defect. That seems honest enough to me."

"But you haven't said *what* defect!"

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"Naturally not. But it ain't no more unfair'n selling a second-hand car. You gotta expect bugs in used merchandise, sonny. Now, if you were the *first* owner, you'd have a gripe. You know well's I do that this thing's been used to pieces for the last umpteen thousand years. Gotta expect depreciation."

"Well—" said Melvin, half-extending his enfisted bill. "If you're not just handing me a *line* about its origin . . ."

"Look," grunted the old man, with taxed patience. "Here is what I *do* guarantee you: this *is* Aladdin's Lamp, it *does* conjure up a Genie when it's rubbed, and he *will* do everything in his not-inconsiderable power to grant your wishes. All you care to make," he added, with a somewhat mysterious inflection.

"Something about the way you said—"

"Sonny, do you want it or not?! It's near closing time, and I want to shut up shop. Buy it or don't buy it. It's all the same to me. Other customers with less nosy attitudes will—"

"All right, all right!" said Melvin, thrusting the money into the shopkeeper's hand. "I'll take it."

THE man took the wrinkled bill, smoothed it out on the top of the counter, then hung it across the stems of the cash-register keys to dry. He lifted down the lamp, extended it toward Melvin, then paused a second to interject, "All sales are *final*, you know?"

"I know, I know," said Melvin. "I saw your sign. You retain the right to buy it back at one-tenth the purchase price, like everything else in this crazy shop, but no warranty whatsoever."

"Good. Then we understand one another." The old man smiled, handed over the lamp, then escorted Melvin to the door, almost shoving him out the entrance before locking the shop and then dropping the worn wooden blinds behind the glass-paneled door.

Melvin climbed the five short steps to sidewalk-level, his precious lamp tucked, unwrapped, under his arm, where he clutched it like a hard-won football, never letting go until the front door of his own apartment slammed behind him. There was an imitation fireplace in the small parlor. Melvin set the lamp upon the mantel, centered it carefully, then went into the jalousied niche that was the kitchenette and had himself a stiff drink to calm his dancing, trembling heartbeats.

"*Power*," he said to the depths of the emptied shot-glass. He liked the pucker-gape-purse feel of the word on his lips, and had a few more drinks to loosen his lips the better to pronounce this

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wondrous word, which he repeated sporadically between sips. When he had reached the pink-faced, glow-eyed stage of murmuring "Un*lim*illitted powwer!", he recapped the bottle and returned to the parlor to fondle his new acquisition, taking care to but pet its ancient surface, lest a chance stroke evoke the Genie prematurely. "Gotta have wishes *ready*," reasoned Melvin. "Can't call up a genuine Genie and have him stand around twiddling his thumb." So he pondered a bit, sat carefully in a wing-backed armchair, then with tingling expectation rubbed the lamp.

"I am the Genie, the slave of the lamp. What is thy will, o little master?" said the abrupt newcomer to the apartment.

Melvin, still a bit awestruck at the typical flare of sulphurous flame followed by a gout of scarlet smoke which then took the form of an Arabic character in bolero jacket, turban, pantaloons, curve-toed slippers, and bright tasseled sash, who stood seven feet high at the shoulders, simply stared dumbly. The Genie looked upon him, smiled tolerantly—he was, of course, quite used to receiving this initial reaction from past masters—and waited with servilely folded arms of muscular bronze hue.

"I—I want a million dollars," said Melvin.

The Genie glanced about the shabby, furnished apartment, nodded its head, and said, "You most certainly do. No one would live in such a place who was found monetarily wanting."

"I don't mean 'I *lack* a million dollars'," said Melvin, catching the other's misinterpretation. "I mean that I would like to *have* it."

"Naturally," said the Genie, settling its bulk into the faded grip of Melvin's sofa-cushions, then kicking off the curve-toed slippers with a sigh of vast relief.

". . . *Well?!*" said Melvin, once it became obvious that the Genie was not about to conjure up anything greater than a yawn.

"Tolerably," said the Genie. "Though it does get a bit cramped in that lamp over the years. But my health is as well as can be expected for someone over three thousand years old."

"I mean, where's the million dollars I want to have?" blurted Melvin. "I didn't want your personal medical history!"

"Oh," said the Genie, raising a bushy eyebrow, "did you have a *particular* million dollars in mind, master? A rare feat of mind, that. So few persons can concentrate on as many as *five* disparate objects at one time, let alone one million bills—unless some of the cash was in larger denominations?"

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MELVIN, about to explode into lush Anglo-Saxon, held his tongue, decided his Genie was of a patently literal turn of mind, and reached for a pad of paper in the topmost pigeonhole of an old desk near his chair. "I'll write it down," he said.

"Can you write Arabic?!" marvelled the Genie. "So few men—"

"Can't you read English?" interrupted Melvin, aghast.

"*Should* I be able to?" said the Genie. "I have never found a need for learning western lore via the printed word, so—"

"But you *speak* English, and understand it, do you not?" demanded Melvin, dropping the pad with a fidget of exasperation.

"You yourself speak many Arabic words," said the Genie, with an air of puzzled politeness, "such as *admiral*, *nadir*, *zenith* . . . Could *you* read them written in their tongue of origin?"

"Well . . ." muttered Melvin. "I guess you have me, there."

"You guess wrongly. I have you nowhere," said the Genie. "You are over there, and I am over here."

"Hold on, a minute," Melvin began, then groaned in muted rage as the Genie obediently clutched the arms of the sofa. "You mean," Melvin continued, choosing to ignore the—he realized—time-consuming task of explaining what he had meant to this verbatim-oriented servant, "that you have no knowledge of English idiom? You obey only what the words *literally* mean?"

"I obey what I *understand* them to mean, yes," modified the Genie, with an expansive smile. "But three thousand years of existence, mostly confined to the lamp, have taught me the virtue of patience. Speak on, o little master, and we shall surely have an eventual meeting of the minds. Though one does hear that east is east, west is west, and never—"

"Yes, yes," Melvin interjected, waving the Genie silent. "Let me think a moment."

"Why should I *prevent* the operation of your mental processes?"

"I mean— Oh, never mind. Just allow me a moment of uninterrupted meditation upon this verbal problem."

"'Moment'," said the Genie, "is such a *relative* chronological term, master. Can you be a bit more specific regarding the time you wish me to remain bound to silence?"

"Until I *ask* you to speak!" exploded Melvin. "Is that clear?"

The Genie remained silent.

"Is that—?" Melvin said, a bit louder, then realized that this command of silence, at least, *was* being obeyed. It boded well. At least he was learning the mandate-knack about small requests. Not much of a granted wish, but—a definite beginning. He

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thought, and thought some more, and then had a—he hoped—foolproof phrasing. He would say, "I want you to bring me one million dollars in cash, right now." And that should do it.

"Genie," said Melvin, "I want you to bring me one million dollars in cash, right now."

The Genie simply sat where it was, not even blinking.

"What's the matter?" asked Melvin, and "Are you all right?", and "Speak to me!" The Genie sat like solid stone.

THEN Melvin had a rare flash of intuition. "The command!" he said aloud. "I gave it the command to be silent, and it is carrying it out until revoked. Apparently, I am only granted wishes in sequence. Still, now that it *has* granted this first wish, I should be able to— No! I'd forgotten the *full* command. Remain silent until I *ask* it to speak!"

"Speak to me!" he said, then belatedly realized that he had already voiced that very command and been ignored. Because, of course, it *was* a command. It was not 'asking', it was 'telling'.

"*Will* you speak to me?" amended Melvin. When silence still reigned upon the motionless Arabic lips, Melvin realized that, as phrased, his request might be but an inquiry into probabilities, the sort best answered by, "*Che sera sera.*"

"I, thy master," ventured Melvin with heroic control, "here and now do ask you to speak to me, Genie."

"What do you want me to say?" said the Genie, relaxing.

"Forget it," said Melvin.

"Forget it," echoed the Genie, with prompt obedience.

Melvin's lips worked, but he held himself in check. At least the Genie was talking to him, again, and a minor infraction of Melvin's intended meaning was little enough to bear with.

"Are you ready," he said, instead of the vituperative phrases lurking deep down in his larynx, "to grant my next wish?"

"How can I know that until I hear it?" said the Genie. "For certain thaumaturgical performances extend even beyond *my* vast capabilities, such as granting a paradoxical request, the doing of which would undo itself in simultaneous process."

A littled snowed by the flowing prose, Melvin lost sight of his personal goals and asked, "Such as?"

"You might wish, for an instance," replied the Genie, hunching confidentially forward as one who delights in voicing dark lore, "that I make the grass turn orange."

"And— Couldn't you?"

"Impossible. Part of the identity-factors inherent in grass include its wonted color-range:

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yellow through green through bluish-green. So it could not be turned orange, or it would no longer *be* grass; it would be a grass-shaped growth of an orange color, which is not the same thing at all."

"But if I asked for such a plant?"

"I would create one. But it would not be orange grass. It would be something entirely new. No more could I bid a rock to fly, since rocks by nature remain where they are unless moved from without; a rock-shaped object which flew would be possible to me, but not a flying rock."

"I'm not sure I follow you," said Melvin, lapsing into idiom.

"While I, on the other hand, am *certain* you do not, since I go nowhere at present," responded the Genie, amiably enough.

"Oh, for—!" Melvin groaned, helplessly. "Let's halt this conversation and get on to my wish. I want you to make me a millionaire—Wait!" Melvin held up a hand, shutting his eyes in self-reproach. "Before you ask me 'Which millionaire do you wish to be?', let me cancel that request and re-phrase. Now, listen carefully: I want you to bring me one million dollars in cash, right now. There!"

"Where?" said the Genie, solemnly.

"Another idiom," sighed Melvin. "Ignore it. Just bring me one million dollars, right now . . . No, *wait!*" he appended, as an uncomfortable thought struck him. "If you bring it—Where would you get it *from?*"

"I would go from person to person to person elsewhere," said the Genie, "until such time as I had amassed the required amount. Were I lucky enough to encounter a single person with the full amount upon his person, of course, I would stop there, but the chances of so doing are astronomically small."

"No good, that's stealing," said Melvin. "And while I don't know for certain, I have the feeling that I would not remain a free man long enough to enjoy my ill-gotten gains."

"How so, o little master?" the Genie inquired solicitously.

"You would *flub* it! I know you would," Melvin mumbled. "I don't know how, but you would. Maybe you'd give them receipts with my name on them, or tell them who had sent you, or—"

"I would not, Master!" the Genie expostulated, its large round face woefully sad at the slur upon its servitude. "Try me. The wish is well-phrased. You want me to go out, gather one million dollars in the current specie, and return it here to you. I can do so, and at once, nor will a single person— or, since you mistrust my use of the language, a multitude of persons, either—

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know whence I came or where I go."

"You're *sure* . . . ? I haven't overlooked *something?*"

"Thy will is clear. It shall be done if you but bid me."

"Well . . . All right. Consider yourself bidden."

"I hear and obey," said the Genie.

ITS form dissolved into scarlet smoke once more, smoke which swirled ceilingward and vanished. Melvin sat and waited. Fifteen seconds ticked by. Nineteen. Twenty-three—

Smoke billowed and shimmered in the air, and the Genie was standing on the hearth before Melvin, a smile of triumph upon its face. It extended a hand, opened the fingers, and said, "Behold."

One dull copper penny lay upon its upturned palm.

"*But*—!" said Melvin, as the coin dropped into his hand.

Too late. The Genie was gone again. Twenty-two seconds elapsed. It was back again, this time with a quarter and two nickels. "*Genie*—!" Melvin yelped, but again too late.

In the next half-hour, he had eighty-six cents. And the Genie paused not in its obedience, though Melvin begged and raged and clawed futilely at its bolero jacket during its infrequent materializations. Luckily for Melvin's sanity, sometime before midnight its peregrinations brought it into the vault of a bank, and at 11:57 PM precisely it settled onto his sofa with a satisfied sigh. Melvin, slumped wearily atop a mound of mingled monies, could barely speak, so constricting was the thundering fury that gripped his insides.

"This could have taken *forever!*" he at last managed. "Do you *never* cease your task in mid-magicking?"

"I am bound," the Genie said with a little shiver, "by most awesome vows to obey the will of the owner of the lamp, Master. To pause in my efforts before thy will were truly carried out to the fullest extent would be to incur the most dreadful penalties. Once I begin to grant a wish, I may not halt until it is truly granted. Even at thy request."

"But what if it were harmful to me?" asked Melvin. "Is there *no* method of countermanding a Genie?"

"Not to my knowledge," said the Genie. "Though one may certainly exist, in the ancient archives of the olden sages."

"Can you find the countermanding formula for me?"

"Who shall know?" sighed the Genie.

"But if I ask it—Will you *seek* this countermand? And return," he added quickly, "at half-hour

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intervals to report on your progress—Oh, no, wait . . ." Melvin smacked a palm against his forehead. "I just realized—If I *do* bid you find this formula, and none exists—You must seek forever!"

"Naturally," said the Genie.

"And if you do not seek it, I am forced to rely upon my own sagacity to word my wishes with care, lest I be betrayed into doom by my spoken desires?"

"That is the usual arrangement, yes," nodded the Genie. "But why fret, o little master? Thou hast one million dollars in cash, and may *purchase* manifold items hitherto only available through necromantic powers. Why not simply enjoy thyself?"

MELVIN eyed the pile of money, the shining coins, the cool green paper. "Perhaps I should," he said. "Yes. Yes, indeed. A new home, a car, girl friends, servants—! Yes, why not, indeed! And when this is gone, I can wish for more!"

"Indubitably," said the Genie.

Melvin ran his fingers through the money and chuckled. "If my friends could only see me now!" he laughed. "Rich beyond dreams! I wish I could see their faces," he said, "when they—" But the last two words had spilled from his mouth by sheer inertia. On "faces", the Genie had vanished.

"No," murmurred Melvin, his voice low and cold with dread. "No, he *wouldn't* . . . He *couldn't* to that! Not *that!* He—*Aaagh!*"

Melvin looked only for an instant upon the form reappearing on the hearth, and only caught the merest glimpse of the slack, gore-dripping objects laid neatly across the thick forearm like a wine-steward's serviette. Then he grabbed the lamp from off the mantel and plunged from the apartment without a backward look, fighting the hot rising of his gorge.

The shop was locked and dark. Melvin hurtled down the short flight of stone stairs, whimpering uncontrollably, and began to pound with his fist upon the glass. Somewhere in the depths of the shop, a pale yellow light flicked on. Melvin pounded harder. Shuffling footsteps approached beyond the portal with maddening slowness, and then—finally—there came the snap of a bolt, the rattle of a disengaged nightchain, and the door began to open.

"You said," Melvin babbled, "you said that when the lamp's ownership is relinquished, the previous owner's wishes are then undone. Is it true? Tell me it's true!"

The door was fully open, now, and Melvin could see the silhouette of the old shopkeeper

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against the dim light at the rear of the inner room. "Fool!" came a creaking, horrible travesty of a voice. "Know you not that a friend is one who shares one's interests! Who performs a good service for one?!"

"But—I don't—What do you —?!" Melvin wept, confused.

Then the old man stepped forward into the glow of a nearby street light, and Melvin shrieked at the blood-oozing, eyeball-dangling skull beneath the grizzled thatch of hair. "I never *meant* . . . !" he gasped, frozen with fear as two gnarled hands came up toward his throat . . .

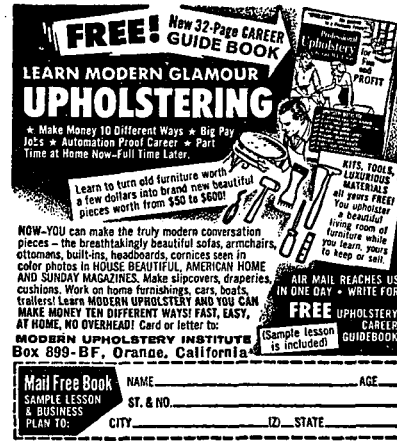
In desperation, then, Melvin rubbed upon the metal fabric of the lamp, and heard the roar of magic flame behind him.

"I want you to—!" he yelled, backing from the groping old man, from the staggering near-corpse spattered with warm, glistening red stains. And realized that—in summoning the Genie to save him—he had performed a good service for himself, and that the former wish must therefore—without possibility of countermand—be fulfilled.

He screamed only twice.

Once, gurglingly, as withered, claw-like hands clamped about his throat. Then in a rising crescendo of agony as swift, deft Genie fingers found the flesh of his face.

THE END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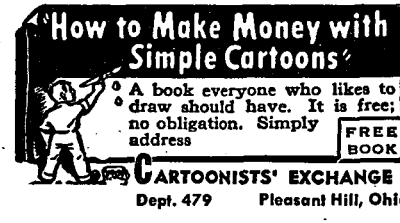
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2064, OR THEREABOUTS

By DARRYL R. GROUPE

He was just a tall spot moving slow out of the Down Provinces when first I picked him up on the Warn. But he came on dogged and inexorable until he stood dour and spent-seeming, frowning at my armored gates, the noon sun of a sun-flashing day glinting upon his sheathed face.

I ALLOWED him through my gates one by one, when the weapons report and all the decontaminators signaled he was clean, and I saw that his heart was exposed as well as some of the gears activating the breath bags. There were tatters of flesh, and torn metal, over half of his upper shell. It was as though some giant claw, I thought, had ripped him across the chest in some accidental quick encounter. Or more it was, I thought, like a madman might work and rip at himself after some long time of frustration.

"You're hurt!" I impulsively said, a strange compassion working through me as I stared into his rusted sorrowing eyes.

"NO!" he said, putting down the small easel he carried, "not the way that you think I am hurt. The heart works well still, and the covering being off the gears of the chest does not slow them one whit. But I am hurt, deep-wounded, daily killed by the long unrewarded years of looking, not finding." He dropped his head forward then and his shoulders were bent, and I knew enough about burdens to know that he had one. "Each of us seeks for his own view of the Dream," he went on, "each in his limited way, each to his own degree of time-spent-in-searching looks for his Ultimate. Mine has been almost a total involvement, and the years seem growing late now, mine and the world's. That's why when you saw me, though perhaps I did not seem to be, I was speeding. I was up almost to total maximum with my hinges and braces working, oh, I was on the trail of the Dream again, hotly. Coming down here."

"But why," I stammered,

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"why have you, an artist, come to this place of an obvious involvement in strength, a citadel of real firmness? I suppose you are en route?"

"NO!" He snapped his head up, the old shoulders straightened and the white metal strings in his beard trembled. His head shook on the spring-strips in his neck. "No, I am not en route, except in that larger sense that we are always en route as we wander here and look here. But I hope I am Here now, arrived. I hope I have found—after this to wander no more the Long Search."

"I—I don't understand." In my general uncertainty and surprise I trembled more than I meant to. Instinctively I looked to the better positioning of weapons men and edged a little nearer a steel sentry who stood nearby. "This is no artist's colony," I blurted, "nor an old painter's rest home. This is a working Stronghold, and we hold no dances for maimed Dream Seekers here.—I would hope not to have to be unkind."

HE ignored my words almost entirely. "Through the Down Provinces," he continued, "word spread of a most wonderful armed place by the plastic land of the steel dogs in the Valley of Witch. A man was in a citadel there, according to rumors passed round, a New Processes man of New Processes Land, replaced, metal-shored, flesh-stripped to the very minimum of flesh allowable for mortal man. That man sat serenely living, month in month out, years long, decades long, never influenced by family or friend or enemy, completing his great self through the days of his living, really living a Life. Surrounded by so many security devices and Walls and all the Wonderful Appliances of the Sciences that serve and nourish mankind in this year of Our Discoveries, 2064, he lounged like a superb nut, a giant seed in a great shell, ripening day by day to new Meanings. After wandering lifelong, frantically, the fear-tossed world and not finding—well, to see such beauteous calm—and Life-Meaning—I must before I die!

"Yes, I have been of the wanderers," he talked on, "the lost and searching wanderers, who sometimes never find because we pick, to look for, a Dream too shining to ever be." He plucked a small raveling piece of metal loose from his malleable nose. "Yes, they replaced me, metal-alloyed me, gave me there at the last mostly a mechanical metallic heart, one perhaps as faultless and smooth-working as yours or your great master's. But I was never content to go

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behind some weapons and a Wall to live with the Wonderful Appliances. In short, I could never quite find my place in the stability of the New Processes society. Something writhed unfed, always.

"Frantically it seems I was always chasing the wind to the edges of frightening bottomless caverns of Despair, while such as your great master, with what must have been a surer grasp of The Values, slipped with effortless beauteous calm into the chair of the Dream. I have longed to make some enduring monument; I have hungered after the Great Painting; ever haunted by questions I have tried throughout a long failure to express the Life-Meaning, the essence of YOU and ME. And now, changing my course a little, I have come to do it as a single portrait! one of your great firm master calmly in his chair! Right here in this Stronghold!"

MORE than a trifle alarmed now I looked at the gauntness of him where he stood trembling, his rusted metal flexing, sending up small squeaks and screams. And I noted how his flesh-strips with the years had gone all wrinkled and sere. There was a stench about him of old grease in the hinge joints, and certainly he needed an oil bath to brighten his metal shell. What poor specimens profess to our greatest dreams and questions, I reflected. This smelly vagrant, I thought with the greatest contempt, peasant-robot-thing, probably doesn't have a single Wall or weapons man to his name, and yet he staggers addle-waddle over the countryside, with his easel and paint brushes, talking about his Ultimate, talking about Meaning. As though such as he had any right to question and conjecture! But when his rusting eyes with all their piercing sorrow looked into mine again, I felt a queer watery feeling, that was not fear, flood through my flesh-strips. "Perhaps you have not had your introven," I said. "Perhaps you have food-hunger." I went for a needle and a cup of the special fluid that serves to nourish our flesh-strips, that small part of mortality the Rebuilders have had to leave between metal and metal, even here in New Processes Land.

When I came back he was lying along the floor, looking like the small beginnings of an interesting stack of scrap steel. His hands were over his face, the fingers spread, and except his eyes gleamed through his fingers like two brown fires I would have thought him entirely "done with it all." With the snap of a rusty spring he came to a sitting position. "I do not wish to

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dine," he said. "I am quite well, and strong, really. It's just that so near to Dream's find, to trail's end, to final realization one grows a little fluttery in the dream bag, a little tight in the think box, oh God! oh God! A kind of tightening around the mind cups it is; a kind of great hammering of the heart that has waited so long comes on. And a throbbing beats just under the gears of the eyes to make one see phantom wings. One feels suddenly tired and close to death on the brink of the Great Jubilation.—That's why I lay down."

He stood erect, just unfolded up from the floor with a snap of all his joints. In some ways it reminded me of an automatic tree coming out of the plastic earth-shell, the way they do when spring comes round to Big Calendar and someone thumbs the switch to Green Things in Season Control. "Take me to him," he cried, "for it grows late, late in my years as well as old in the years of the world. Let us waste no more time. Take me to your great master, that man who sits living like a great firm nut, a splendid seed, the earth's finest fruit, ripening in the hull of his Walls, guards and guns. His Meaning I would record; such an adaptation, such a fearless calm in the face of the ever-lurking Disaster is surely the Beauty I have sought."

Unfortunately, at that juncture I had one of my panic times. Certain wheels had spun round, the slots had been spread, and in my mind now it was time for my cowardice. While he stood there waiting to be conducted to the Great Calm Face, I passed totally into the Trembly Country of Fear, my own personal Nation of Dread. While he stood watching, wondering, I went completely into my Cycle of Anguish, and I could not help how it was. I trembled violently; metal parts clanked and zinged; my face steel became so gaunt and distorted that metal-complaint started up a high shriek-and-whine. I started wildly to think of all the happenstance things that might befall me and my fort. Though the sound-buzz was constant now, meaning that all was well in the Wonderful Appliances that often served me so well, how long would it be so? Let a wheel falter a thousand miles away, let a shaft break where a billion phantom buckets dropped uncountable billions of power droplets upon a blade, upon a thousand blades, and lights would blink, the wonderful buzz would go scratchy, and my fort would cough and catch its breath and flounder like a bent-down sick old man. And the sun! what of the sun? the giver of all. The sun burns up! The sun falls out of the sky! A big-

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ger sun comes flying flaming out of the Great Yon and burps and my sun is wafted away, or even it eats my sun! opens up like some great boa mouth and gulps a small flaming egg. Fears, Fears, FEARS! In my personal cycle, far in the Kingdom of Dread, I think of all the fears, fears founded, fears unfounded, fears old, fears new, fears not before dreamed up perhaps by any man.—An attack! a space launch from far-off dangerous old Mars! Some strange metal-rot works all unknown, unsuspected, in my hinge joints for years! I fall into chaos and parts. Suddenly.—What else is there but fears ever for any reasonable man? What? WHAT?

WHEN I came back to a calmer place and found somehow the small firm Fortress of Hold in my groping mind I saw how he waited and stared. A pounding as of hammers on huge steel tubes filled my metal ears then; wave on wave of shame washed up from my mortal strips. I clung to two steel men and braced my feet hard on a pillar of iron fitted around marble slabs. Fighting hard I managed to meet the intensity of his gaze. "There's no one here but me—I swear," I finally said, "I'm master here.—I'm the one you would paint! Shall we move to my calmness chair?"

For a moment too intense to measure in the long hurling on of Time the brown balls of his eyes seemed awash in his battered head. His face steel wrinkled and screamed, the white threads of his beard trembled as if a sharp wind passed through. I watched the Dream finally die in the iron face of a man, and being what I was there was no thing I could do. "I'm sorry," I heard him say as from some immeasurably great distance, and I felt something of how sorry he really was for us all.

After awhile he left, clutching his empty unused easel in a kind of greater desperation, it seemed—out through all the launchers and the Walls, the weapons tracking him, and seeing him go I felt I was watching a Dream at the very end of its road. He reeled toward the plastic valley of the steel dogs, and I went deeper into my complex to take me a calmness bath, and later I aimed to try with new nerve-strip rays to stay that trembling that had started up again all through my flesh-and-steel shell. Later I heard how he was met at the edge of the Valley by a little masquerade new-metal dog carrying the barest of plastic bones marked THIS FOR THE MEANING SEEKER. Of course it was a wide joke sent up from the Palace of the Witch, and that was why the air over the White Val-

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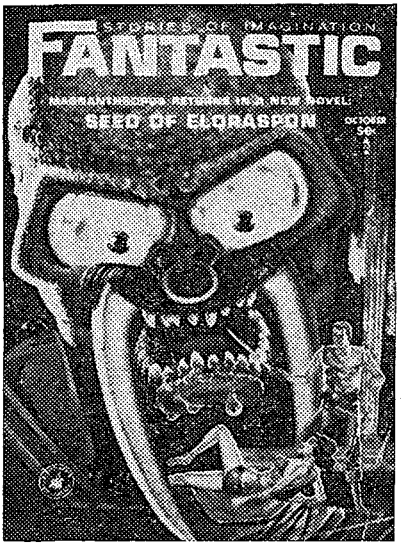
ley was suddenly alive with big clown-faced balloons and the long guns of laugh salvoing out a full Ho-ho salute. The masquerade dog, the gears and the punched cards in his head working perfectly, backed carefully away while the artist examined his bone. Handling it in other than the one prescribed way, of course, the artist caused the mined bone to explode, and his heart and colors and empty easel, as well as his metal shell and the few fleshstrips he owned, for a moment joined the Ho-ho salute and the big-ballon clown carnival high over White Witch Valley.

Considering his high seriousness, as well as the intensity of his try, it did seem, even to me, a most unsatisfactory way for him to go.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH



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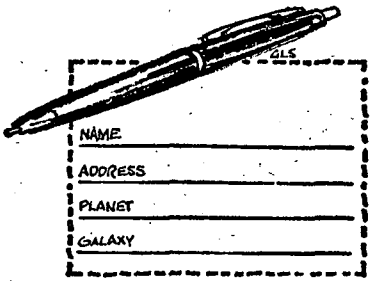

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FIRE SALE

(*Continued from page 49*)

Everything seemed to stop.

The Devil chuckled, and nodded, and thought, and then, slowly, nodded again.

"So—that's your bargain?"

"Not mine," the General said. "It's in the nature of things. If I die, and the war comes—"

"I get less out of it," the Devil said. "And thirteen hundred people won't come near to making up for it. I see." He paused and then said again: "I see. Yes."

"And?"

"You are," the Devil said, "perfectly correct. I shall refrain. Yours is the better bargain."

"I—"

General Debrett was talking to empty air.

There was no one, no thing, in the room except the General himself. And, of course, his continuing thoughts.

Five minutes passed before General Debrett whispered, very softly: "My God. What have I done? What have I really done?"

THE END

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